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Suspicion

A Story

BY

CHRISTIAN LYS



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LONDON:

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12, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN.

1889.

LONDON:
ROBSON & SONS, LTD., PRINTERS, GREAT NEW STREET, E.C.



SUSPICION.

CHAPTER I.

I ENTERED my house in Cavendish Square one chilly evening in March, and found my wife sitting before the fire in a profound reverie.

"How late you are, Teddie!" she said, brightening at my entrance. "What have you been doing all the afternoon?"

"Sitting in Nettlewood's office most of the time, discussing every residence he has on his list, and I think I have found the house to suit us at last."

"Have you? Where is it? What is it like?" said Edith eagerly, as she drew a chair up to the fire for me, and sat down on a footstool at my feet.

I laughed at my wife's enthusiasm, and kissed her before answering her questions.

"It is on the Devonshire coast, close to a village called Leak. It is a large, rambling old place, built in an old-fashioned style, has not been inhabited for some time, and is consequently out of repair at present. The grounds are well grown, very spacious, and I am told that the views from the different windows of the house are magnificent, comprising a perfect panorama of views."

"How delightful!" she exclaimed. "I do so long to get out of smoky, dirty London. We must go and see it at once, Teddie."

"Of course I have given you the description as it appears on Nettlewood's list, and as he tells it. It may appear far more beautiful and romantic on paper than it is in reality, you know, and there are many things to be considered before we rush headlong into a purchase of this kind. First, it is a long distance from town, and you may miss the excitement of London when you find yourself buried in a little seaside village."

Edith looked at me reproachfully for even suggesting such a thing.

"Well, we will consider that settled; you will not miss the excitement," I said with a smile. "Secondly, there are not, as far as I can gather, many eligible people in the place of whom we could make friends. The village is small and inhabited by a few fishermen and their families, and apparently contains nobody of importance."

"That is no objection," answered Edith promptly. "You know quite well that I am tired of this endless whirl of society, this endless entertaining and being polite to one's neighbours, of which we have had so much lately. I long to have rest, and have you all to myself."

"You may see too much of me then, dear."

My wife answered me with a look; so I consented to have my second difficulty put aside.

"Thirdly, there is another serious drawback, Edith, and one which I think wants weighing well before being passed over."

"What is it? I knew there was something serious to come, as a 'thirdly.'"

"The place is haunted."

Edith opened her eyes in astonishment, and then laughed heartily.

"Haunted! How very aristocratic! My dear, I am now perfectly

convinced that this house is exactly what we want. There is nothing I enjoy so much as a mystery—just like a woman, isn't it ?”

“Yes,” I said doubtfully ; “but there seems something more than mere village gossip in the story. Although Nettlewood couldn't, or wouldn't, repeat it in detail, I learnt this much. Some few years ago the gentleman who then lived at the Manor House was found dead in the library. The windows and doors were locked on the inside, and yet there seems every reason to believe that it was murder, and not suicide.”

“But you know, Edward, if anything happens in an old country house it is always so exaggerated, whilst if the same thing occurs in a London dwelling it is soon forgotten, and no ghost-story becomes popular. Very likely in the case of this Manor House the door was not found fastened on the inside, and, admitting that a murder was committed there, probably the whole of the mystery attending it is a superstitious fabrication.”

“It may be so,” I answered. “Anyhow, we must see the place before we come to any decision, and I propose we go down next Thursday. As it is a long journey, I will write to the village inn and order a room for the night. I dare say the place can do that much for us. We can look over the house, and come back next day. Will that suit you ?”

Edith was satisfied with this arrangement, so after dinner I wrote to “The Landlord, The Wheatsheaf, Leak, Devonshire.”

The reader will probably have gathered from the foregoing conversation that I was a man of considerable means and of no fixed occupation. I had been married little more than a year, during which time we had mixed freely in London society, until, as my wife said, we had become tired of it, and had decided to move into the country, at least for a time. The house-advertisements in every paper and in almost every agent's list, had been carefully studied by

us, but until now we had seen nothing to satisfy us, which is not altogether surprising, as anyone who has ever done any house-hunting will bear me witness. I had heard of the place at Leak through an agent, who had been looking out for something to suit me for some time, and he told me of it in a half-despairing kind of way, as if it were next thing to impossible to please me. His description of it interested me, and since he told me of its beauties before mentioning the mystery which hung over it, I had determined to think about it, and was not driven from that determination by having a ghost thrown in as one of the necessary fixtures. The subsequent conversation with my wife I have given, and so I can commence my story at once. One word about myself will, perhaps, not be out of place. I have spoken of my private means and my having no fixed occupation, but I am not an idle man. I make my hobby my employment, which hobby is literature, and although the name of Edward Wade is not altogether unknown in the much-coveted field of fame, it is not in my case a very lucrative profession, but it is intensely amusing. If, then, with the strange things which actually happened to me, I can weave a story interesting to my readers, I shall consider myself amply rewarded for committing my exciting experiences to paper.

Late in the afternoon on the following Thursday we were in possession of the private parlour of The Wheatsheaf at Leak.

First impressions go a long way, it is said, and certainly our first impression of the village was highly favourable. It stands in a little hollow in the downs, entirely shut out from the surrounding country, but open to the sea, and the village street runs with a rather steep declivity to the beach. Touched as the scene was by the rays of the setting sun, our future surroundings were most enchanting. The sea was as blue as sapphire, the downs as green as an emerald, whilst round the huge black-and-grey rocks which lay

in confusion on the beach the waves broke in a lazy foam, and made most refreshing music. Then over this harmony of colour and massive beauty of cliff and ocean the sun cast a rich golden light as he sank in the western sky, making of earth a paradise far more lovely than words can paint.

The Wheatsheaf was not commodious, but its landlord did all in his power to make us comfortable. I had told him, when I wrote, the object of our visit, and he had apparently repeated my information to everyone in the village, for we were the object of considerable interest to the inhabitants, many of whom were standing round the inn-door when we arrived. I could easily guess the cause of this interest.

"What do you think of our village, sir?" asked the landlord after we had had our dinner.

"It is very lovely!"

"It's well enough," he replied, as if he were contradicting my too extravagant expression. "You see, it's calm and all that just now, but it blows mighty hard sometimes, and then the beauties you admire look anything but lovely. So you've come to look at the Manor House, sir?"

I answered in the affirmative.

"Strange, isn't it, that you should come to an out-of-the-way place like this?"

"No; I don't think there is anything strange about it."

"You won't stay, sir," he said decidedly.

"Why not?" asked Edith. "What is there against the house?"

"It's haunted, ma'am—that's what it is. There isn't a man in the village who'd go up to the Manor House after dark, and most of 'em don't care about it in broad daylight. They ain't nervous chaps neither in these parts; but there's something unnatural always stirring about that house."

"Whereabouts is it?" asked my wife with interest.

The landlord moved to the window.

"You see that path there across the downs; that's the short cut to it. The road goes a long way round."

"Then it is not in the village?" I said.

"No, sir; it lies on the other side of the downs, and stands high above sea-level. There are three houses over there. The one farthest inland belongs to Mr. Gaythorne; the one nearest the sea is Captain Vincent's; and between the two is the Manor House."

"And is it the only haunted one?" Edith asked.

"Yes, ma'am—at least, I never heard anything against the others. It's perfectly true about the Manor House, though. There are always strange and queer sounds there after dark, which make the blood run cold, and sometimes they are heard in the daytime. Then the figure of a man has often been seen to glide down the avenue, and disappear in the shadow of the house. Everyone is frightened of the place. It has long been empty, and, I think, will remain so."

"What is the story about it?" enquired Edith after a moment's silence.

"Well," said the landlord slowly; "a Mr. Morsland, who lived there some few years back, was found dead one morning. Some say he committed suicide; in fact, most people say so; and the coroner said so, because he was found in a room with the windows and door bolted on the inside; but there are a good many who still think he was murdered, and they do say that it wasn't done by a man, but by a spirit. Now Mr. Morsland's ghost is often seen about the place—sometimes standing at the gate, sometimes gliding rapidly down the avenue, sometimes looking out from one of the dark windows; and, as I have said, strange sounds come from the house, and are heard in the woods which surround it."

This was a lively description of our new home ; and, although I am not at all superstitious, I must confess that I was conscious of an unpleasant sensation as I listened to the man's story.

We thanked him for his information, and he promised to look for the Manor House keys, which were in his possession, but which he said he had mislaid.

"Folks don't flock to look after the place," he said in explanation.

Just as we were starting next morning to go to the house, under the guidance of our host, a gentleman came up the village street, and, lifting his hat, introduced himself as Captain Vincent.

"You have come to look over the Manor House, I hear," he said.

"Yes ; we are now going there."

Everybody in the neighbourhood seemed to have heard of the object of our visit.

"And have you plucked up courage to go ?" he said to the landlord rather sarcastically. "I thought you were frightened of the place."

"So I am, Captain, but someone must go."

"Your would-be guide is a bad one," continued the Captain, turning to me. "Everybody about here is in terror of the house. May I offer myself instead ?"

Of course I said that we should be grateful to him ; and with our new companion we started across the downs, leaving the landlord at his inn-door looking after us.

I was convinced that he was very pleased to get out of the expedition. We were certainly the gainers by the exchange, and I was glad to find that after all we should have a presentable neighbour.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN VINCENT appeared to be a man of importance in the place, and although he was most pleasant, he gave one the idea that he was conscious of his own superiority to his surroundings. He was tall, dark, rather good-looking than otherwise, and he was bronzed by long exposure to the weather. His face was a very expressive one, and his conversation, besides being that of a cultivated man, was interesting and amusing. There was, besides, something fascinating about him. I think it was his genuineness. There was a merry ring in his laugh, and he seemed to have a real, almost boyish delight in everything he did and said. About the Manor House he said a good deal. He told us many stories connected with it. He gave us glowing accounts of its beauties ; but he might have been an agent trying to get the place off his hands for all he said about the mystery attached to it. My wife's presence had, no doubt, something to do with this reticence ; but, since the house was the abode of a local legend, I rather wondered that he did not mention it.

The view from the summit of the downs was glorious. Behind us was the village, nestled in its little hollow, the white thatched cottages looking most picturesque in the morning sunlight. To our left was a magnificent stretch of country where the fields on the hill-sides presented every different shade of green, relieved here and there by the sombre colour of one newly ploughed or unsown, or one brilliant with the colour of some wild flower. To our right was a broad expanse of ocean dancing and sparkling in the sunlight, the crested waves reflecting here the sunbeams, and there the fleecy clouds which sailed across the sky. Before us the downs undulated as far as we could see, whilst at our feet lay a valley, long and narrow,

plentifully wooded with pine-trees. This valley, unlike the Leak one, did not terminate in the beach, but ended in a rocky precipice against the base of which the sea broke continually. Even at our present distance we could hear the sound of the breakers as they dashed their waters into spray against its unyielding front.

As the landlord had said, three houses gave life to the valley. Nearest the sea, and perched apparently on the very edge of the above-mentioned precipice, stood a little cottage, surrounded by pine woods, and this our companion informed us belonged to him. At the upper end of the valley, a large and seemingly new house was built on the side of the down. It looked rather bare in spite of its fine position.

"That belongs to a Mr. Gaythorne," said Captain Vincent, pointing it out to us. "There is only a son at home at present, I believe. The old people are abroad somewhere for the benefit of their health, and I fancy their absence is likely to be a protracted one. Below us, in the centre of the wood, you can just see the Manor House."

Our attention was centred on this spot at once. Buried in a dark tangled mass of woods lay a house, picturesque enough, but uncanny in the extreme. From our elevated position it could not be seen to advantage, but it was evident, at the first glance, that the place was much out of repair. The grounds, which might at one time have been pretty and well cultivated, had long since degenerated into their wilderness of former times, and were overgrown with every imaginable weed and undergrowth. The yew hedges presented a mournful and untrimmed appearance, and the surrounding woods were so dark and dense that it was doubtful whether the sun could ever pierce through them to gladden the ground beneath with light and warmth.

"The first view is not prepossessing," I said to our companion.

"No ; but you can hardly form a fair judgement from this position. Shall we go down ?"

A steep descent led down to the road which traversed the valley from one end to the other, and which was the main road to Leak ; and opposite to the path we had come down was the boundary hedge of the Manor. This had in some places grown to an extraordinary height, and in others had died for want of care. The heavy iron gates which opened to the road were red with rust, and creaked ominously on their long disused hinges as we opened them.

An avenue led from the gates to the house ; but what had once been a spacious carriage-drive was now hardly discernible as such, being thickly covered with dead leaves and fallen pine-cones, the accumulation of many winters. On either side the woods stretched away into darkness, the red rough trunks of the pine-trees looking even more ruddy against the sombre background ; and the only sound which broke the stillness was the rustling of the dead leaves as some frightened rabbit scurried through them at our approach. In the open spaces the grass had grown rank and coarse, and the paths had become as green as turf. In the centre of the wilderness the house stood mournful and desolate. Many of the windows were broken, and some of the brickwork and mortar had fallen from parts of the copings and parapet, but the house was too substantially built for a few years to make it a ruin. It was indeed a picture, with its dark-coloured brickwork creeper grown, its many gables, and its deeply-set windows.

"How lovely it is !" exclaimed Edith, as she gazed critically at the mansion. "What a shame it is to let it go to ruin !"

"Its ruin is not irretrievable, although it has been getting into a bad state for years. Even in the last occupant's time nothing was done to it," returned Captain Vincent. "Shall we go in ?"

After brushing away the cobwebs which hung across the porch, our guide opened the door, and we entered.

An empty dwelling is never a pleasing spectacle, and where,

added to its emptiness, there is a vastness and grandeur of proportion, and a rumour that it is the abode of unearthly things, it becomes at once very depressing and unpleasantly impressive. The interior of the Manor House was magnificent. A spacious hall, which was open to the top of the house, and lighted by two large stained glass windows on either side of the hall door, opened into large and lofty rooms, oak-panelled, extensively decorated, and with windows set in deep embrasures. A handsome staircase led up to a landing, from which ran many corridors, and the bedrooms were scarcely less rich in decoration than the rooms below.

"What do you think of it, Teddie?" asked my wife, as we wandered from room to room.

"Very beautiful, but hardly lively enough for us."

"Lively enough! Why, the very reason we are moving from town is to be quiet."

"The neighbourhood is certainly quiet, if that is an attraction," said Vincent; "and I may add that it is very dreary in winter. This, I believe, is the library and the haunted apartment," he continued as we entered a room on the ground-floor. "I must confess I do not think it very inviting."

The room was, perhaps, more handsome than any in the house. It ran from back to front, being lighted at each end by a large French-window. The massive book-cases were plentiful, making one despair of ever being able to fill them, and between each set of shelves, oak-panels reached from floor to ceiling. A huge fireplace, with a large square hearthstone and an elaborate mantelpiece, stood opposite the door. The room was dusty and dreary, of course, but in good repair. One of the bookcases had a large piece of carving broken off the top, but this was the chief dilapidation as far as I could see.

"So this is the haunted room, is it!" said Edith with a rather

contemptuous laugh. "I cannot say that I experience any feeling of nervousness. To my mind it is simply perfect; and just imagine what a grand Christmas-log will burn on that wide hearth. It will be like living back in the good old days, the only incongruous things being ourselves, with our nineteenth-century dress and manners. Ghosts! I don't believe there are such things."

Captain Vincent then spoke of the mystery for the first time.

"I do not believe much in these legends myself," he said; but he spoke rather doubtfully. "They have generally a very commonplace explanation. Still, if I must be truthful, I have a certain feeling against this house. There was a suicide or a murder in this room some years back, and nothing very satisfactory was ever found out about it. Probably you have heard of it."

"Yes. From the landlord at the inn this morning."

"He would make the most of it, I have no doubt," he continued. "The story is universally believed in the village, and many say they have seen a ghost here."

Edith, however, continued to laugh at the mystery, and became so excited over her prospective arrangements for furnishing the Manor House in a style worthy of it, that I had some difficulty in getting her away in time to have lunch and catch our train back to town.

The Captain walked back to the inn with us, but would not come in to lunch.

After shaking hands with my wife, he motioned me to remain behind a minute.

"What do you think of the place?" he said.

"It is very pretty."

"Yes; but I mean about taking it?"

"That will depend entirely upon my wife."

"Mrs. Wade seems very delighted with it," he answered; "but, if

you take my advice, you will not live there. I would not say anything to frighten her, although I tried to warn her against it. I am not in the least superstitious ; but I have certainly, on more than one occasion, seen a figure move swiftly up the avenue as I have passed. I saw it first after nightfall, and put it down to imagination; but I saw it again in the broad daylight, and I knew it was no fancy then."

"Are you certain of this?"

"As certain as I am that you are standing before me now."

I thanked him, and we parted.

In the afternoon we returned to town, Edith perfectly delighted with the result of our visit, and longing to take the house ; and I very doubtful as to the desirability of doing so.

CHAPTER III.

I HAVE always been led to believe that man, as compared to woman, is the superior animal, but I think, judging from my own personal experience, that such is not the case. I fancy that a man's wife, presuming, of course, that there is deep and true affection between them, generally manages to guide him as she pleases, and by her caresses makes him consider her wishes commands.

It was so with me. After many long consultations concerning the Manor House, and lengthy arguments both for and against, I yielded to Edith's wishes, and went to the agent to take the house on a three years' lease. The owner, whose name I forget, seemed quite indifferent as to whether the house had a tenant or remained empty, and since it had got a bad name, and was out of the way, the rent was ridiculously small. During the necessary negotiations one circumstance occurred which caused me some surprise. Someone

else had apparently taken a sudden fancy to the property, and, moreover, offered to pay a higher rent than that at which it had been offered to me.

Not being very anxious about the place myself, I made this serve as an excuse to my wife, but in vain.

"You must out-bid him, Edward," she said with determination when I told her. "Now, do, dear, to please me. I have set my heart upon it, and I shall be miserable if I don't go there ; I shall, indeed."

This wish was certainly a command, and when it was enforced by Edith putting her arms round my neck, of course there was nothing to be done but obey.

Beyond causing me surprise my rival gave me little annoyance. I had obtained the first refusal of the house, and finally settled to take it at the price originally agreed upon.

I at once put a London builder to work, giving him *carte blanche* to put the house in thorough repair, but, by Edith's desire, giving him strict injunctions not to remove any of the panelling or to alter the old-fashioned appearance of the place in any way. For the next few weeks our time was occupied in making numerous arrangements, in buying furniture, and in taking sundry journeys down to Leak to inspect progress.

Progress in anything, I imagine, means change. It certainly did in this case. Never have I seen such a metamorphosis as took place in and round the Manor House under the hands of the workmen. The place certainly looked very lovely in its restored condition, and with its garden cleared of leaves and rubbish. Outside and inside the transformation was wonderful, and when my little wife's artistic mind was brought to bear on the arrangement of the interior, it is impossible to describe how charming the rooms looked with their harmonious furniture, old china, and *bric-a-brac*. In its new aspect

I became quite reconciled to my new home, and almost forgot all the queer stories connected with it. Indeed it is not so easy to associate a ghost with a newly-swept and garnished mansion, as to imagine it roaming about an old and ruined dwelling surrounded by a weedy and leaf-covered garden.

Spring had ripened into summer when we took up our abode at Leak, and for some weeks our chief delight was to wander about our new home and admire it. Everything, outdoors and in, was fresh and delicious.

Captain Vincent was the first to make his duty-call, and, having once got over that ceremony, he was continually at the Manor House, making himself most agreeable in every way. A nearer acquaintance greatly increased my liking for him. I don't exactly know why—and I suppose it would puzzle anyone to explain it—but some men and women appear to go through the world surrounded by a halo of romantic mystery, although the circumstances of their lives may, after all, be quiet commonplace. This was the case, in my eyes, with Captain Vincent.

Mr. Gaythorne also was not long before he made our acquaintance.

He was a man whose delicate features, fair hair, and somewhat effeminate appearance made him look considerably younger than he really was. At first he was inclined to be nervous and reserved, but when once we had put him at his ease, he developed into a most interesting individual, with a power of conversation and depth of character for which no one would have given him credit. He was exceedingly matter-of-fact, was of a studious nature, and quite agreed with my wife in considering the stories of the Manor House mere village-gossip and idle superstition.

Like Captain Vincent he soon became a constant guest at our house, and, being a merry quartet, the first weeks in our new home passed very pleasantly.

I began to see that I was wrong in thinking that Edith would soon get tired of being removed from the bustle of town. Every day she seemed to grow happier and more contented, and I know—do not laugh at me for saying it, reader—that amongst all the flowers and beauties around, my wife was the fairest blossom of all.

Although Mr. Gaythorne was very nice, I had a decided preference for Captain Vincent. He was a man more after my own heart—a man with ideas and fancies corresponding to my own, and, although he did not follow a literary profession himself, he took great interest in my work, often giving me very good advice, and criticising my writings, good-naturedly enough, but with judgement and common-sense. It was only natural that I should prefer him to Mr. Gaythorne, who took no such interest in me. On the other hand, Mr. Gaythorne was Edith's favourite. Perhaps he was more of a ladies' man than the Captain, who was rather blunt at times, and apt to say exactly what he thought, which eccentricity does not generally find favour with the fair sex.

In these days I learnt one thing—namely, that there was very little love lost between these two men. They never actually broke out into open rupture, but they could not entirely help showing their mutual dislike. However, it did not trouble me much. I did not like everybody I met, and these two had the same privilege of liking or disliking whom they would as I had. I could assign no reason whatever in their case, and whether Edith noticed it or not I cannot say; but as time went on she seemed to dislike Vincent as much as Gaythorne did. The Captain noticed it, and I am sure was often hurt by my wife's treatment of him. He never said so, and endeavoured not to show it, but his feelings would often appear against his will.

With Gaythorne it was quite different. Everything he did, everything he said, was applauded by my wife. She asked his

advice ; she admired his taste in art, in the arrangement of flowers and furniture ; whilst if Vincent gave an opinion he was politely snubbed.

Once or twice I remonstrated with her in a quiet way and said I thought it was rather unkind of her, but she answered that she could not like everybody equally well, and I could say no more.

The ghost—if, indeed, any such thing had ever haunted the Manor—was evidently frightened at us or at the new paint and varnish applied to its former dwelling-place. Not a sound other than natural ones ever disturbed us, and even Vincent, who had confessed his absolute belief in it, began to laugh at his own superstition.

“ I suppose it must have been my fancy,” he said one evening, as we were walking along the cliff close to his cottage.

I had been dining with him, and he was walking home with me.

“ Fancy goes a long way sometimes,” I returned.

“ Yes, yes ; perhaps I had taken a little too much wine that night,” he continued with a laugh. “ I am glad, both for your sake and mine, Wade, that the spirit has forsaken the place. It has been far more pleasant for me since you came here. Bachelor-life in a village is not the most lively existence one could choose, you know. It gets terribly dull sometimes.”

“ Why do you live it, then ? ”

“ Because I can find no wife to share it.”

“ I did not mean that,” I answered, smiling at the readiness of his answer ; “ but why do you live in such an out-of-the-way place without a single friend near you ? ”

“ Can’t afford to live anywhere else,” he said shortly. “ Money is not plentiful enough to allow me to live well in town ; but I have enough to make me shirk work, so I live here at my ease. I do run up to London now and then for a change.”

It was a lovely night. Across the broad expanse of water the moon painted a silver highway which shimmered and sparkled below us, and lost itself in the dimness of the far horizon. The rollers beat in time and tune against the base of the cliff, and the waters rushed in and out of the caverns of the rock with a dull gurgling sound. To our right and left the cliffs rose like huge giants, the shadows changing fantastically upon them as the clouds floated across the moon, the many deep gorges looking black and hideous as they descended almost perpendicularly to the water. It would be extremely dangerous for a stranger to wander along those cliffs at night, for the path is narrow and intricate, and the shadows most deceptive.

In spite of the beauty of the evening there was something sad about it, and it seemed to have its effect upon us both.

"Some men's lives seem to be laid among the shadows, Wade," Vincent said after a long pause. "I am one of such men. I do not think I have one relation in the world, and hardly a friend except you. When I die I doubt if a single person will shed a tear."

Poor fellow! I felt for him, and assured him of my friendship. His words seemed almost prophetic. He walked with me as far as the Manor House, but would not come in.

As we stood for a moment talking at the gate, a man came down the path which leads to Leak. Seeing us standing there he appeared inclined to turn back, but Vincent called out to him:

"What brings you over here, Redfern?"

I had not recognised the landlord of The Wheatsheaf.

"I was coming to see you, sir."

"To see me!" he said in astonishment. "All right; one moment. A fine time of night to come to me, isn't it? Excuse my leaving you. Good-night."

Redfern came down on to the road as I entered the garden, and walked towards the cottage with Vincent, apparently imparting something of great interest as they went.

I found Gaythorne in the drawing-room with my wife, and I noticed at once that they both looked very serious and preoccupied.

"Is anything the matter?" I said. "You look as melancholy as if there had been a funeral in the house!"

"I am so glad you have come back," said Edith, coming to me, and putting her arm through mine. "There is something wrong with this house, for the ghost has been here to-night."

"What do you mean?"

"I am not superstitious, you know, Teddie, but there have been such queer noises about the place to-night. Luckily Mr. Gaythorne came in before they commenced, or I should have been terribly frightened. I am nervous as it is."

It was a marvellous thing for my wife to confess to such a failing.

"Noises!" I said. "What kind of noises?"

"I don't know how to describe them. First of all there was a rumbling sound, and I thought it was distant thunder, then it seemed as if wood were being broken up, and I am convinced that I heard the murmur of voices."

"That's true," said Gaythorne suddenly, rising from his seat and going to the window. "I tell you what it is, Wade; someone is playing tricks about here."

"Nonsense!" I said rather angrily. "If anyone had wanted to frighten us with trickery they would have tried it long ago."

"Not so sure about that," said Gaythorne shortly. "Something has been going on about this house to-night. Two of us heard it, so it cannot be fancy."

There was certainly truth in this argument, and I was silent.

"What do you think it is, Gaythorne?" I asked after a few moments' pause.

"Can't make out."

"It has ceased for some time now," said Edith.

"It seems awfully absurd to be frightened by a noise," I said, trying to laugh, although I was conscious that I did not altogether succeed in the attempt. "I don't——"

"Hush! Listen!" interrupted my wife suddenly.

All three of us were on the alert in a moment.

There was a dull, rumbling noise like thunder, then a heavy thud, and then silence again.

"It is worse than ever," said Edith, trembling.

"It must be the servants," I said, going to the door. "I'll call them."

There was no need to do that, for as I went into the hall the servants—four of them—came running from the kitchen, all looking as pale as death.

"What is it?" I said, trying to look surprised at their sudden appearance.

"Didn't you hear it, sir?" asked the cook in a whisper.

"Hear what?"

"That noise, sir."

"Yes, I did. Didn't one of you let something drop?"

They all answered in the negative; and, as if to prove their words, another heavy thud resounded through the whole house.

"Is it in the cellar, sir, do you think?" suggested the housemaid.

"Good idea!" ejaculated Gaythorne, and, taking up a candle which stood on the hall table, he started off.

The servants would not remain by themselves in the hall, and as

we followed Gaythorne *en masse*, I asked them if they had heard any noise before during the evening.

One of them thought she had done so, but they had put it down to the wind. This corresponded with my wife's assertion, that the noises were worse than ever since I came in.

The cellars lay under the kitchen-part of the house, but the noise could not be heard there at all.

"There is nothing here to account for it," said Gaythorne, holding the candle above his head as he stood in the centre of the stone floor. So we returned to the hall, where we stood for nearly half an hour, not knowing exactly what to do.

All at once a heavier thud, and a more prolonged rumbling than any of the preceding ones, made us all start.

"The library!" whispered Edith, clutching my arm nervously as she spoke.

Gaythorne sprang to the door in an instant and threw it open. The room was in darkness, and the light, streaming into it from the hall, made it look very ghastly in our present state of mind.

I followed Gaythorne into the room, and Edith stood with the servants in the doorway.

"Quick, a light!" exclaimed Gaythorne.

I struck a match in a moment, and was advancing to light the lamp, which stood on the table, when my match went out. At the same instant I felt something touch me in the darkness, as if it were passing me swiftly, and I distinctly heard a voice whisper in my ear:

"Leave this house; you are in my kingdom!"

To strike another match was the work of a moment, and, lighting the lamp, I stood with it raised above my head, so as to throw its rays into every corner of the room; but in vain. Except for Gaythorne, Edith, the servants, and myself, the room was empty.

CHAPTER IV.

EMPTY ! Yet I was perfectly certain that someone had whispered in my ear. I was sure that someone had touched me in the darkness.

I cannot say I was actually afraid—at least, not of any supernatural agency ; but I had expected to see somebody in the room who had no business there, and was perfectly amazed to find the room occupied only by ourselves. In the first few moments of my speechless surprise I had time to reflect that it would be better not to say anything about what I had heard to my wife. I was convinced that she had heard nothing ; and she had experienced enough fright that evening without my adding to it.

Having lighted the lamps, and also the fire, the latter more for company than for warmth, we stood looking at one another in a stupid kind of way, as if each one expected somebody else to volunteer a solution to the mystery.

Our visitors, whether ghostly or material, appeared to prefer darkness to light, for as soon as the room was lighted up the noises became less distinct, and presently ceased altogether. We listened attentively, expecting them to be renewed every minute, but not a sound, save the murmuring of the wind outside and the crackling of the wood in the fireplace, broke the stillness.

The servants had continued to stand in the doorway, looking frightened enough, it is true, but still showing more courage than I should have given them credit for. I had taken no notice of them, being too much engaged with my own thoughts, and, if I had, I could not very well have told them to leave us, and return to the kitchen. However, after half an hour had passed, and nothing more occurred to disturb the peace of the house, I ordered them to go to bed.

"I shall sit up to-night," I said to reassure them. "I do not fancy we shall hear anything more now, and to-morrow we shall probably discover the reason of the disturbance."

Contrary to my expectations, they acquiesced without a murmur, and seemed to have overcome their fears as soon as the noises ceased.

When they had gone we remained silent for some time. I should have liked Edith to go to bed as well, for I was longing to ask Gaythorne whether he saw or heard anything when my light was blown out, or whether he had any special reason for calling so excitedly for a light when he had first entered the library. But I would not say anything before Edith. Poor little girl! she had looked very horrified when we were standing in the hall, yet now, strange to say, she appeared the least agitated of the three. I presume fear belongs to women more than to men as a rule, but certainly, if my wife were really very nervous, she concealed it most effectually, and was an example to both Gaythorne and myself.

"It is very curious!" I said at last. "In some unaccountable way the mystery seems to be connected with this room."

Gaythorne was silent. He took a cigarette from a box on the table, lit it, and puffing out a great cloud of smoke, watched it intently floating above him, as if he were trying to discover some solution to the problem in it.

"It is curious," said Edith; "but you must remember that this is the room of which all the stories were told. Still, I refuse to believe in any supernatural agency. Someone is playing tricks; why, I don't know—how, I don't pretend to explain; but that is my conviction."

Then it was quite evident that she had not heard or seen anything when my light was extinguished.

I looked at Gaythorne, expecting him to offer a suggestion, but

he remained absorbed in the contemplation of the clouds of his cigarette smoke.

"To-morrow we will begin a careful inspection of the house," continued my wife. "If we can find no trace of trickery, then, perhaps, I will believe in a ghost, but not till then."

"Are you at all nervous?" I asked, astonished at the matter-of-fact way in which she viewed the mystery.

"Well, I cannot say that I am very," she answered, playing with the leaves of an open book which lay on the table beside her. "Of course, whilst that terrible noise was going on I was frightened—any woman would have been ; but I am getting over it now, and being convinced that whatever happens in every-day life must have some tangible cause, I am naturally anxious to discover that cause. Do you not agree with me, Mr. Gaythorne?"

"Mrs. Wade, I am astonished at your bravery. I have not studied woman's nervous system very deeply, but most of the women I have known generally retreat to a dark room during a thunder-storm ; have a fixed idea that a burglar secretes himself nightly under their beds ; and have a wholesome dread of a poor, inoffensive mouse."

Edith smiled a little scornfully at his speech.

"I believe I am less nervous than either of you," she said. "Why, Teddie, you surely do not believe there is anything supernatural connected with this affair?"

"No," I answered, in a tone which I felt was anything but a convincing denial ; "no, I do not believe in anything of that sort."

"And you, Mr. Gaythorne?"

"I agree with you, Mrs. Wade, in considering that we are the victims of trickery ; but, at the same time, I think it more than possible that there is some grave reason for these disturbances. Perhaps, for instance, there is something hidden in or near this

house, which certain persons are anxious to keep us from discovering. It would be their aim to set you against the place, and to let it lapse into its former ruined condition."

The same idea had been gradually assuming shape in my brain, and I waited for Gaythorne to continue.

"If such be the case, we may possibly find a clue ; we——"

"But surely the idea is hardly tenable," I answered. "Would they have allowed us to go unmolested so long?"

"Most probably. Had this 'ghost' appeared whilst the workmen were still engaged here, you would not have left a stone unturned in your endeavour to discover the trick ; now you will think twice before pulling your house down to find a clue to the mystery. Or it may be that you have only just lately done something to arouse suspicion, as, for instance, going innocently to the very spot where the secret lies buried. Is it not possible?"

I did not answer.

"In fact, to me it seems not only possible, but highly probable," he resumed, lighting another cigarette, and leaning back in an easy-chair prepared to defend his theory by a lengthy argument. "Once admit that there is something which will not bear the light of day hidden in this house, and the problem is easy to solve. A tale, having its origin in Mr. Morsland's death, is spread abroad that the house is haunted. The position of the Manor, and its somewhat gloomy surroundings, lend considerable colouring to such an assertion, and as time has gone on, and the house has become dilapidated, the trick has become easier to perform. I believe the key to the mystery, and, in fact, the very ghost himself, is to be found in human form in the village."

"It may be," said Edith, after a pause ; "but I fail to see how one man could cause such a disturbance as we have heard to-night."

"One man!" exclaimed Gaythorne. "Oh, there may be a dozen in the secret."

"But the noise, Mr. Gaythorne," persisted my wife. "Think of its intensity, and then tell me how even a dozen men could create it!"

"If I could tell you that, Mrs. Wade, the secret would be very near the end of its existence. We have got to find that out. There is one thing to be remembered, and that is that a comparatively small noise may be greatly intensified by its surroundings. A single shout in a mountainous district may be echoed a dozen times; and the noise which we have heard to-night, if made in some subterraneous passage, might become greatly magnified to our ears."

"It seems almost strange that you have never tried to clear up this mystery before," I said, after some consideration. "You said the other day that you had constantly been told weird stories about this place, and it is not easy to live within a stone's throw of a ghost without having a desire to see it."

"I have thought of it often," he answered; "but I have not had many opportunities of doing so. At the time of Mr. Morsland's death I was very interested, and, indeed, became well acquainted with the detective who spent some weeks here in trying to settle the affair in a satisfactory way. Since then I have been abroad a good deal. However, I have wandered through the grounds after dark, and have discovered nothing. Perhaps some of the superstitious villagers have seen me on these occasions, and taken me for a ghost. It is a comical consideration that whilst I am endeavouring to disprove a fallacy I am actually strengthening people's belief in it."

"Then you conclude that our search to-morrow must prove fruitless?" said Edith.

Gaythorne was silent for some time, and took several puffs at his cigarette before answering.

"It may ; but I fancy we have somewhat localised the mystery. In some unaccountable way this room seems to contain the key to it."

"We knew before that this room was considered the haunted chamber," I said.

"Yes ; but I put no more faith in that assertion than I did in the ghost ; nearly all such stories have their scene of action in a library. I suppose the reason lies in the fact that men's imagination becomes more lively after they have been reading alone in a sombre room, and that they are more ready to fancy they see things which are only in reality the creatures of their own brains."

Mr. Gaythorne's capabilities of separating probabilities from improbabilities were shown most plainly as we sat throughout the night discussing our plan of action, and endeavouring to discover by argument what knowledge concealed from us. His theory was by no means to be laughed at, for he had evidently considered its details carefully, and was prepared to defend any point which Edith or I chose to attack.

Hour after hour passed slowly, yet hardly monotonously, for under the circumstances there was too much of the exciting element to allow monotony. But slow they were, as the fire burned lower, and the clock chimed out at intervals with a precision almost painful.

"It must be daylight by this time," I said at last.

We had lapsed into silence for some time, and the clock suddenly startled me from my reverie. I went to one of the windows as I spoke, and threw open the heavy oak shutters.

The light of morning streamed into the room, making the lamps grow pale, and, as I opened the window, a gentle breeze laden with the perfume of the pines came in as if to drive out the air of mystery. Indeed, it was hard to believe, now that morning

had come, that our fears were not all due to nervousness and imagination. The dew sparkling on the lawn in myriad colours, and the flowers already opened to greet the sun, seemed to dispel all idea that they were surrounded by anything unearthly, and made us feel foolish for having kept watch all night whilst they had slept so securely.

I must confess that it was a great relief to me to see daylight again, for in spite of Gaythorne's assertion that we were the victims of trickery, and in spite of my own reluctance to believe in anything supernatural, I could not understand how anyone who had any right to be an inhabitant of this world could have left the room without being seen by one of us. That someone was in the room when we had entered last night I was convinced, and yet when the lamps were lit the room was empty but for ourselves. I was anxious to speak to Gaythorne about it, so when we had stood at the window for some time inhaling new life from the fresh air, I turned to my wife.

"Don't you think you might go to bed now, dear?"

"I think I will," she answered with a half-stifled yawn. "I am almost ashamed of myself for having sat up, there seems so little to be afraid of. If this sort of thing occurs often, Teddie, you really will have a ghost in your house, for I shall become as white as one. Late hours never did suit me. Good-night, or rather good-morning, Mr. Gaythorne; I will not fail you at breakfast-time, and afterwards we will enter upon our new vocation of private detectives."

I opened the door for her, but, as Gaythorne seemed inclined to follow her example, I motioned to him to stay behind.

"Gaythorne," I said, turning to him when we were alone, "what did you see or hear last night when we first entered the room?"

"My dear Wade, I wouldn't say anything before your wife, but somebody was in here when I called so quickly for a light."

"I know. Who was it?"

"I cannot say," he answered slowly; "but I distinctly saw a shadow—it hardly seemed more, glide away from me as I opened the door. And you?"

"I did not see anything, but someone whispered to me, 'Leave this house; you are in my kingdom;' and certainly something brushed my sleeve in passing. What do you think of it! Doubtless before Edith you felt compelled to modify your views, but now you can speak out."

"I certainly omitted to tell your wife what I had seen; but my views are as I have stated. I believe trickery to be the chief element in the mystery."

"But, my dear fellow," I said somewhat hastily, "how could anyone leave this room without being seen by one of us? The servants were at the door; I was well inside the room; and you, I suppose, were close to that table. It is impossible."

Gaythorne smiled good-naturedly at my hastiness.

"Well, can you offer a suggestion?"

I couldn't, and was silent.

"Now, Wade, listen to me. You do not believe in a ghost, do you?"

"No—most emphatically no!"

"And at the same time you are absolutely certain that somebody spoke to you last night, and therefore that somebody was in this room?"

"Yes."

"Then I maintain that trickery is not impossible, because that 'somebody' did get away. Let us examine the room more carefully."

Mr. Gaythorne's logic was sound, and I was forced to accept it. He proceeded to open the shutters of the window which faced

the front garden, and then to take a minute survey of the walls of the room.

As I have before mentioned, the library was oak-panelled, each panel being the whole height of the room. These my companion examined in turn, but as he passed from one to the other did not appear to find anything suspicious about them. He also inspected the heavy book-cases, which were fixtures, projecting into the room; and the old-fashioned fireplace and mantelpiece came in for a good deal of attention also; but in vain. I had not expected that it would be otherwise.

"You are baffled," I said with a smile.

"Yes."

He stood in the middle of the room and looked first at the ceiling, then at the floor, and then at each panel again, whilst I sat on the edge of the table and watched him.

"You're a curious fellow, Wade," he said suddenly. "I half believe you are pleased at my failure."

"Why? Surely the whole thing concerns me more than it does you?"

"Just so. Yet you laugh at my being puzzled. Upon my word, I think you favour the ghost theory."

"I do not, I assure you."

"Then who spoke to you last night? Was it one of the servants, think you?"

"No; it was a man."

"A man! You didn't say that before; you talked only of a voice. Come, we have advanced a step. It couldn't have been one of the servants or your wife; and I was the only man in the room besides yourself. Do you think I did it?"

I started up from my sitting position.

"What do you mean, Gaythorne?"

"I want to know if you accuse me of playing a trick upon you? You won't admit trickery; you won't confess to a belief in a ghost; and as I was the only other man present, it must have been my voice."

"Now you are talking folly," I said angrily. "I do not consider it a joking matter at all. I am going to have a bath and a change before breakfast. You had better do the same."

And I left him.

There are certain things in life—certain childish remembrances, it may be, or certain words spoken under peculiar circumstances—which live in the memory, and Gaythorne's words lived with me. Of course it was foolish, yet, try as I would to drive away the idea which Gaythorne had jestingly put into my head, it refused to be forgotten, and I found myself thinking over it, and pondering over it, until at last I felt that I had become suspicious of him. It was such a curious question to ask at such a time, and the more I endeavoured to laugh at it, the more I found myself weighing the possibility of his being the author of the mystery.

CHAPTER V.

My wife was true to her promise, and appeared at the breakfast-table looking as fresh as a daisy, and no one would have imagined that the night had been a vigil to her. Gaythorne also appeared in excellent spirits, and they discussed the morning's inspection in very much the same way as they would have talked of a coming picnic or garden-party. The fears of last night were treated as a joke, and the success of the inspection seemed to both of them a matter of certainty. I have no doubt that their conversation was the principal means of putting the house in equilibrium again, for it was probably repeated

in the kitchen that the mistress and Mr. Gaythorne made light of the matter, and therefore it must be all right.

With me it was different. I was perfectly silent during the meal, hearing the conversation only vaguely, being occupied with my own thoughts and fancies. It was foolish, no doubt, but since my conversation with Gaythorne my whole idea of the mystery had changed. The more I argued with myself, the more hopelessly entangled did I become ; the more I tried to put my fancies down to foolishness, the more they became the compass which pointed my suspicions to Gaythorne.

I am well aware that the reader will accuse me of being a man easily led to disbelieve in a friend—may go even further, and consider me a despicable fellow—but put yourself in my place for a moment. Your house is suddenly aroused by an unearthly noise, which cannot be accounted for. It is not imagination, because everyone hears it. Someone whispers to you as you enter a dark room, and tells you to leave the place, because it belongs to him, yet when the room is examined you find it empty. You are convinced that it was a man who spoke to you. There is only one man in the room besides yourself, and he asks you whether you accuse him of being the author of the mysterious command. Put these several circumstances together, reader, and I think you will be compelled to admit that I had ample reasons for my suspicion. Of course, on the other hand, there was the difficulty of assigning a reason for his doing it, and the very abstruse problem, “How could he be the author of such a noise when he was standing with us in the hall at the time of its occurrence?” Still, he might have accomplices, and, if so, there must be some very urgent reason for thus frightening people in their home.

On account of these feelings I was anxious to get out of the morning's inspection, for I felt that it would be very dishonourable

to play the spy upon a man who I really believed must be innocent. It would be time enough to do that when my suspicion was actually confirmed.

Breakfast was finished, and I was just wondering how I could best excuse myself when Vincent entered the room.

"I was prepared to apologise for my early visit," he said ; "but as I am not the first, I presume no apology is wanted."

"Mr. Gaythorne has been here all night," said Edith, putting on her garden-hat, which the servant had just fetched for her.

"Been here all night !" exclaimed Vincent.

My wife nodded in assent.

"The much-talked-of ghost has appeared at last, Captain Vincent, and Mr. Gaythorne stayed in case we might want assistance."

"What does it all mean, Wade ?" said the Captain, turning to me for an explanation.

I told him at full length all that had occurred—the noises, our examination of the room, and our contemplated inspection of the grounds ; but I did not mention before Edith what I had heard when I entered the library.

I could see at once that he thought seriously of the matter. He was silent for some time, and during the pause, Gaythorne and my wife left the room.

When we were alone I told him of the mysterious voice.

"What do you think of it, Vincent ?"

"I don't know. You must give me time to consider. Are you going to join in this inspection ? Because I came this morning to ask if you would walk over to Leak with me. I want to have a quiet talk with you ; will you come ?"

This would furnish me with a very good excuse, so I gladly accepted his invitation.

As we passed through the garden, Edith and Gaythorne were examining the ground outside one of the library-windows, the former acting as chief detective, whilst the latter followed her instructions, carefully endeavouring to find traces of footsteps in the loose soil. Surely he would not take so much trouble if he were really the author of the mystery !

"It seems rather a forlorn hope at present, Mrs. Wade," said the Captain with a smile.

"We have only just commenced," was her short answer. Then she turned to me. "Where are you going, Teddie ?"

"I am going over to Leak."

"And going to leave us to do this by ourselves ?" she said reproachfully.

My wife looked at me for a moment in a curious way. Probably I should never have thought of it again had not subsequent events recalled it to my memory.

"Had we better wait until you return ?" said Gaythorne as he stood in the middle of a flower-bed with his coat-sleeves turned up and his hands covered with earth.

"Oh no, don't do that. If you can find some trace of our mysterious visitor I shall be delighted."

Captain Vincent and I were both silent as we walked across the downs, but I knew what his thoughts were. I felt that he agreed with me in considering the affair serious, and there is great companionship in kindred feeling.

"Shall we go and sit down in The Wheatsheaf parlour ?" he enquired, as we entered the village. "We can talk quietly there."

Redfern was lolling idly in the doorway as we approached, intently watching another man who was staggering along on the other side the way. I knew this latter as the village scapegoat—

"Drunken Jim," they called him, and with reason, for the sun seldom went down and left him sober.

"He's on early this morning!" said the landlord to Vincent, pointing with his pipe-stem in Jim's direction.

"Mornin', Cap'n!" shouted the drunkard. "Mornin'. After work, play."

Vincent muttered something which I could not hear, and then said aloud :

"That fellow is a disgrace to the place. Leak, taking it altogether, is a very well-behaved village."

Together we entered the parlour.

"Wade, I am going to speak to you on a very delicate subject," Vincent began when we were alone.

I looked up in surprise, and then motioned him to continue.

"I hardly know how to commence, but I suppose when one man is speaking to another, it is best to say what he means at once."

"Certainly," I answered, as he waited for me to make some reply.

"Do you think there is anything between Gaythorne and your wife?"

"What!" I exclaimed, as I started from my chair, and faced him.

The Captain fidgetted uneasily with his moustache.

"As I said, it is a delicate subject. Mr. Gaythorne is a very constant visitor to your house; Mrs. Wade is a very charming woman, very attractive, and—— Well, I have only asked you a question."

After my first surprise I was almost stunned by the awful abyss his suggestion opened before me. I might entertain suspicions of Gaythorne, but of my wife—never. Yet what a cruel thing it is to force such ideas upon a man! Might not this hideous idea,

assuming it to have any foundation, throw a light upon last night's occurrence? Yes, Gaythorne might be a villain; but Edith, the little woman whose lips had so often touched mine, whose arms had so often been clasped round my neck! No, she was as innocent of treachery as a babe of sin. Then all my blood boiled up against the man who had dared to insult her; who had dared to intimate that my wife was unfaithful to me.

"What do you mean by daring to speak of my wife in this way?" I said furiously.

"Forgive me. I said the subject was a delicate one."

"Delicate, sir! It is the insinuation of a blackguard."

"I do not wonder at your anger," he said quietly. "A friend is seldom thanked for a timely warning when it gives pain. But you hardly understand me at present. I did not mean to cast suspicion on your wife; I only mentioned her in reference to the other. I spoke principally of Gaythorne."

This somewhat appeased me, but at the same time I did not altogether believe him.

"You have a curious way of treating a delicate matter, Captain Vincent. Will you be good enough to explain yourself more fully?"

"Yes; but you must remember that I am speaking as a friend. I think—indeed, I feel certain—that Gaythorne has fallen in love with your wife, and, although I do not wish to intimate that she reciprocates his admiration, still it is well to keep such men at a distance. I am speaking to you with an earnest desire for your welfare, and taking upon myself the extreme privilege of a friend. A husband who is honourable himself thinks everyone around him is the same, and, if he happens to be mistaken, I presume that it is within a friend's right to point out that mistake. Do you understand?"

I was silent.

"I am a blunt man, Wade, of which fact I have probably just given you ample proof; and there is one thing more I would say, or rather another question I would ask. Do you think Gaythorne had anything to do with last night's affair?"

The same thought, the same suspicion—surely there must be some truth in it. But Vincent had wounded me deeply, and I was disposed to defend Gaythorne.

"What reason could he have?" I asked.

"The fact of your not denying it convinces me that the thought has entered your head. As to his reason for playing the 'ghost,' I am perplexed; but come, tell me the truth."

"Yes, I have thought it," I confessed; "but I have endeavoured to drive the idea away as absurd."

"And you have succeeded?"

"No."

"Then be on your guard. A thought which refuses to be forgotten has some reason for being remembered."

I was silent for some little time.

"What do you advise?" I asked at length.

"I hardly know."

"Shall I forbid him the house?"

"No. That would be to keep yourself in ignorance of the mystery by which he has the power to make your life miserable. Let things go on as usual, but watch him. Do not let him go wandering about the place in search of a clue; especially do not let him be much in the company of your wife."

"Confound it, sir! Leave my wife's name out of the question!" I exclaimed, stung to fury by having it coupled with Gaythorne's.

Vincent smiled and continued:

"In short, do nothing rash. Wait until things develope and

suspicion is confirmed. It will be time enough then to strike a decided blow."

Bitterly did I regret the day on which we took the Manor House. A terrible cloud had come into my life, and, as Vincent and I recrossed the downs, I felt like one who walks at night-time upon the edge of a precipice—uncertain whether or not the next step will be his destruction. Now I believed implicitly in Gaythorne's villainy, and I was just as certain that Vincent, in speaking of Edith as he had done, had meant to convey a suspicion of her as well.

"Remember," said Vincent, as we entered the garden, "not a word about our conversation. Do not be rash. Appear natural, and you will stand a much better chance of arriving at the truth."

I made an effort, and approached my wife, who was sitting idly against a tree, looking most lovely in her graceful position, talking to Gaythorne, who lay at her feet, smoking his everlasting cigarette.

"What success?" asked the Captain gaily.

"None," Edith returned. "Teddie, why did you go away this morning? It was rather unkind."

She spoke half sadly, half angrily; but she unconsciously took a load off my mind. This woman guilty of deceiving me!

"I must apologise, Mrs. Wade," said Vincent; "but I had a little private matter to talk to your husband about."

"I am sorry, dear," I said. "Shall I begin to inspect now?"

"It is no use, Edward. The thing will remain a mystery for ever, I fancy."

"I think I begin to believe in ghosts," said Gaythorne with a faint smile.

What a consummate actor the man was!

That evening when Edith and I were alone, she suddenly turned to me and said:

"What did Captain Vincent want with you this morning?"

I was not prepared for the question, and paused a moment before answering.

"Oh, nothing!"

"Then tell me."

"My dear, it was a private matter. I do not think I can"—then, seeing that she looked disappointed, I added: "at least, I can't tell you just now; probably I will in a day or two."

"I don't like secrets," she said. "There ought to be no secrets between us."

I put my arms round her and kissed her.

"It was nothing of consequence, darling; but he asked me not to say anything about it."

How could I tell her the truth?

She did not answer for some time, but stood playing with the flower at her bosom.

"Teddie," she said at length, as she drew my arms closer round her, "Teddie!"

"Yes, love?"

"I don't like secrets—and I don't like Captain Vincent!"

CHAPTER VI.

I HAD intended to follow out Vincent's advice to the letter—to watch Gaythorne's every action, and to find a hidden meaning in all his words; but he frustrated my plan by absenting himself from the Manor House altogether. A week had passed since that dreadful night, and he had not been near the place, nor did I meet him in my walks or drives. Doubtless, having scented danger, he considered it wise to keep away for a time.

A suspicious man must have someone to watch, and almost unconsciously I began to watch Edith.

It was a mean and contemptible thing to do—unmanly, not to say cowardly, in the extreme ; but some hidden power seemed to drive me on and compel me to it. My life during that week was a misery to me. Many times I almost made up my mind to give up the Manor House and go back to town. Vincent also advised this course; but I never succeeded in carrying my half-formed resolution into practice.

Some people may say that an honest man would have confided his suspicions of their quondam mutual friend to his wife. True, it would have been much better to have done so, but I do not admit that I was dishonest because I did not. I was silent for two reasons: First, Edith liked Gaythorne ; she made no secret of that, and I was sure would not hear a word against him when that word came from Vincent, whom she disliked. Secondly, Vincent had virtually accused her of unfaithfulness to me, and I was anxious for him to see his mistake, not by warning her to show him the truth, but by some spontaneous action of her own.

These reasons, however, do not explain why I watched her, and I do not think I am able to explain why. I believed in her most implicitly, and I did not for a moment imagine that she had allowed Gaythorne to make love to her. A suspicious man is, I think, altogether outside the condemnation of his healthier-minded brethren. They cannot understand him. And it must be remembered that I was only suspicious from force of circumstances. Whilst hating myself for allowing such thoughts to remain with me, a thousand and one little things seemed to point to the fact that they were not absolutely out of place. Here are a few of them. My wife was fond of Gaythorne, whom I now believed to be a villain. She hated Vincent, who had opened my eyes to the truth,

She expressed no surprise at Gaythorne's unaccustomed absence, as if she knew its real reason ; and, above all, she let me know that she suspected Vincent as much as I suspected Gaythorne. Was my conduct so very unnatural, then ? Those will judge me most fairly who have been placed in a similar position.

The Captain almost lived at the Manor House during that week, and searched diligently for some clue to the mystery. But in vain.

We made one important inspection together. I suggested one day that the sounds might be caused by smugglers landing a cargo, and that there might be some cave running in from the seashore under the house. Vincent laughed at the idea at first, and said, in that case, the sounds would most probably be more distinctly heard in his cottage. However, to make certain, we went quietly down to the beach one afternoon, and, launching one of the boats lying there, pulled round the headland until we were opposite the perpendicular wall of cliff which terminated the Manor House valley. This precipice lay back between two projecting masses of cliff, about seventy yards apart, and was quite unapproachable, a ridge of rock shutting in the water, which actually washed the base of the cliff. Even at high water the ridge, although covered in one or two places, was quite impassable for a boat, and at low tide it was several feet above one's head.

This completely negatived my suggestion. One thing I discovered. Captain Vincent watched my wife, and, at first, I did not object to it, as I thought he would soon discover the absurdity of his evil suggestion, and help to root out the weed he had so effectually sown in my heart. But at last he grew too impertinent, often coming suddenly upon Edith, as if to catch her in some unworthy action, until, at last, I saw that she noticed it, and then I was furious. I had a right to watch her if I liked, or imagined I had ; but in him it was the extreme of presumption.

"Look here, Vincent," I said one day, as we stood smoking outside the drawing-room window after lunch, "you are perfectly welcome to pry into Gaythorne's affairs as much as you like, but I forbid you to do the same to my wife. I——"

"I don't understand," he interrupted.

"Oh yes, you do," I returned curtly. "I am not such a fool as not to know that when you first spoke to me about this miserable affair you meant to intimate that my wife was faithless to me."

"I do not admit that ; but, supposing it to be true, am I not allowed an opinion ?"

"Have as many opinions as you like, but you must keep them to yourself."

"And open your eyes to the danger after the evil is accomplished. Some friends do so, arguing, by their mock modesty and conventional logic, that to do otherwise is to overstep the bounds of friendship. I am different."

"Confound it, sir ! There is no danger."

"You think not," he said, with a disbelieving smile ; "and yet I fancy you watch her as closely as you accuse me of doing."

Was my suspicion, then, so palpable a thing that he had noticed it ? If he had done so, then perhaps Edith had also. Like a mighty rush of water set free by a broken dam, the conviction came over me how hideous a thing I was doing. Would not the discovery cause her to lose all confidence in her husband's affection. Lives have been wrecked by smaller misunderstandings than this, and silent distrust has hollowed out a hell where a paradise might have been built up so easily.

"I am her husband," I answered after a moment's pause, speaking as calmly as I could. "My right lies in the fact that she is part of myself ; but to you she is nothing, not even a friend. In suspecting her you are offending my honour."

He winced a little under this rebuke, and his eyes flashed for a moment in anger. Then I was sorry that I had said anything about my wife's unfortunate dislike to him. I should have said so, but he recovered himself in a moment, and continued in his usual placid manner :

"I am well aware that I am not one of your wife's favourites. Why, I am at a loss to understand. Women have strange fancies, and Gaythorne has managed to secure Mrs. Wade's admiration. Your indignation is just ; I have no right, unless it be as your friend ; but, at the same time, my fault is surely more excusable than yours. If you believe in your wife, why watch her with much the same persistency that a cat watches a mouse ?"

"Silence !" I hissed between my teeth. "If you ever dare to say such a thing to me again, I'll——"

"Hush !" he interrupted, laying his hand on my arm, and nodding slightly in the direction of the house.

Enraged as I was, I took the hint, and turned, to see Edith standing at the open window. She seemed to have come on purpose to disprove the charge made against her. My wife was little more than a girl, and looked young enough, I fancied, to be my daughter ; and certainly, as she stood there waiting for an invitation to join us, one would have imagined that she had never had a trial, or known the meaning of a sorrow in her life.

"Am I disturbing a private conversation ?" she asked.

"Mrs. Wade is always welcome," answered Vincent blandly.

"No conversation in this house is altogether complete without her."

Hypocrite ! I hated the man for his lie.

"Thank you. Am I interrupting you, Teddie ?"

"No, dear ; or at any rate you are a very welcome interruption."

"Oh, I thought I might be a disturbing element," she said, with a decidedly sarcastic ring in her voice. "I have been told that women

are at the root of all evil in this world, but if it be true, I suppose there are a few exceptions. Some people, however, seem to have a happy faculty for mistaking the true for the false, and are often able to turn a sweet and happy life into one of unutterable misery by a few bitter words. Don't you think so, Captain Vincent?"

She spoke so carelessly that I did not understand her meaning until I saw the Captain's face change a little at her question. A faint colour mounted into his cheeks, and I could almost fancy that he ground his teeth behind his closed lips.

"I am certain of it," he said, and he astonished me by the frankness with which he spoke; "but at the same time your remark is an enigma," he continued, feigning great attention to her words, and absolute ignorance as to her meaning; though he could not conceal from me the fact that he was acting.

"Do you know the difference between a tonic and a poison?" Edith said.

"Perfectly; but not when they are made a metaphor in our present conversation."

"No? I will tell you," said my wife, putting her arm through mine, and looking Vincent straight in the eyes. "My life has been so happy, that I am afraid at times I have forgotten that such a thing as sorrow really exists. Such a forgetfulness is not healthy, and unless checked would generate carelessness and selfishness. To be brought face to face with a little sorrow, either in one's own life, or in that of one dear to you, acts as a tonic. It shows that happiness here is not the end of all ambition, and leads us to nobler aims and better resolutions. That is the tonic. A poison is a very different thing. It is a punishment inflicted upon you for a sin you have never committed—inflicted it may be by your friends; or it may be a life wrecked by a lie—as, for instance, a wife's fair fame being challenged, and ugly suspicions whispered into a husband's ear.

That is a poison, Captain Vincent. Do we understand each other now ? ”

Vincent bowed slightly in answer to her question.

“No, not quite, Mrs. Wade. I understand you and your unaccountable dislike to me ; but you do not understand me. I have a great admiration for you, and respect you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Respect me !” exclaimed Edith, with a little toss of her head. “Are you sure you do neither more nor less than respect me ? ”

Vincent blushed, unmistakeably this time, and I was quite at a loss to understand what my wife meant by the question. She certainly had the knack of hurting this man’s feelings. Presently he continued :

“If I have been unfortunate enough to incur your displeasure by suspecting one whom you honour with your friendship of not being all open and above-board, I am sorry ; but thoughts are free, Mrs. Wade, and you must allow me the freedom of mine.”

I was beginning to feel anxious at the turn the conversation had taken, and should have spoken had not Edith silenced me by the pressure of her hand on my arm.

“You speak of Mr. Gaythorne ? ” she said. “If it is an honour, I do honour that gentleman with my friendship, and know him to be perfectly worthy of it. You do not incur my ‘displeasure’—that is hardly the word I should use to explain it—and you will forgive me when I say that I think I understand you better than you imagine. I confess I think it a curious method of showing admiration and respect for a woman, when you would lead others to believe that she is guilty of the blackest sin.”

“Forgive me, I would not have people believe such a thing.”

“It is false, sir,” said my wife, proudly and passionately ; “my husband can prove my words to be true.”

"I would again remind you, Mrs. Wade, that thoughts are free."

"That is tantamount to a confession," Edith answered triumphantly. "Then it is war between us. Edward, will you request Captain Vincent to leave this house, and not to enter it again whilst I am mistress here."

Without another word she left us and re-entered the house.

I looked after her in bewilderment. I had had a lurking fear for some time that this might eventually happen. Now the storm had burst suddenly, and no alternative was left me but to obey her command. All idea of being able to change the views of either had gone, and I hardly knew what to say.

Vincent helped me in my dilemma.

"My dear Wade, I understand perfectly. Of course you must obey your wife's orders. I am exceedingly sorry that my presence should have caused this unpleasantness. Perhaps in the future it will be different."

I did not answer.

"You do not share your wife's opinion of me?"

"No, I do not. I must say that I think you have brought this upon yourself. You advised me not to be rash with regard to Gaythorne, and yet you needlessly quarrel with my wife, and so confirm her belief in the man we know to be false. It is a great pity."

"I am sorry," he answered. "I am afraid my zeal for you is greater than my discretion."

"Well, it is done now," I said. "We must make the best of it."

"Yes, your position is awkward, Wade. My exodus will mean Gaythorne's advent. By-the-bye, I found this paper in the library this morning. Read it when you are alone, and if you like, see me about it. I will go over to The Wheatsheaf every morning, so you will know where to find me."

With this he turned on his heel, and went through the garden at a quick pace.

He had left a torn piece of paper in my hand, and had told me to read it when I was alone. Surely it must contain something of vital importance if it required such secrecy in learning its contents. I was alone now. There is no time like the present for settling unpleasant doubts.

So I sat down on a seat and opened the paper. It was part of a letter, and the half-sheet of note-paper, on both sides of which it was written, had been torn in half lengthways. The following is a facsimile of the paper and the words I read :

“LEAK

ould be lost. The
n is guilty and
your husband suspects
ear nothing I should
him. Captain Vincent
for the trust and
me and success I
I may give you back
nd happiness which
no means enjoyed
thfully,

GAYTHORNE.

“DEAR MRS. WADE,

“As your hus

London on Tuesday
we might fix that high
meeting. At eight o’clo
in the library, and whe
quiet we can carry
It may be dangerous
this secret, but I wou
your husband or Capta

CHAPTER VII.

ALL my faith in Edith seemed to crumble into nothingness before this conclusive evidence of her guilt ; and all her other actions, which I had thought to be natural and seemly, looked, when thought of with this letter, like the broken fragments of some deeply-laid

scheme which would suddenly take shape and crush me. To fill up the part of the letter which was torn off was not difficult.

I had arranged to go to London on Tuesday, having some odds and ends of business to transact in town, and I had decided to remain away all night. This was the evening chosen for Gaythorne's meeting with Edith. "It was a dangerous secret"—"your husband or Capt"—"would be lost." What could these disconnected sentences mean but that Gaythorne and my wife had some secret understanding between them which neither Vincent nor I must know? Then again, "may give you back"—"happiness which"—"no means enjoyed." Gaythorne was in love with Edith, and she with him. In his life, as linked with hers, she would obtain that happiness which with me she had never found. The letter was as clear to my excited understanding as if every word were written on the paper I held in my hand.

It was a difficult task to live that day through without arousing Edith's suspicions, but I nerved myself to it, and, I believe, talked in a more light-hearted manner than I had done for months. Heaven knows, it was only a mask to a very hideous reality !

Once I almost made up my mind to tell Edith that I knew her secret, to show her the fragmentary letter, and to accuse her of the terrible crime it bore witness to ; but an irresistible power compelled me to silence, until my mental agony nearly drove me mad.

It was on a Saturday that this happened, and all that day and all Sunday I watched Edith's every action, every expression.

On Monday the torture became maddening, and I know few men have been so near insanity as I was then. The house seemed filled with a thousand devils, who laughed at me and ridiculed me wherever I went. "She is false!" they shouted. "She loves another!" they laughed. "Fool, to trust in a woman!" And then they fled for a moment, terrified, perhaps, at the effect of their malicious insinua-

tions. I went into the garden to find solitude ; but they followed me. I talked about the alteration of some flower-beds to the gardener, to try and divert my thoughts ; but they entered into him, and through his eyes laughed out their ridicule. I found a sheltered corner, and sat down with an open book in my hand ; but the printing seemed blurred, and all the words I could make out were, "She is false !" "She loves another !" "Fool, to trust in a woman !"

Presently I threw the book aside and plunged into the woods to escape my pursuers. They followed me for a time, but at last gave me a little respite, and I was able to think over my trouble more calmly, and to develope plans for the future.

"Shall I go to London and leave an open field for that villain ?" I asked myself.

Yes, it would be better so. If my wife intended to desert me, and I thwarted her now, she would easily find another opportunity. It would be better to know the reality of my misery at once. And if my worst fears were realised what should I do ? Should I bring police investigation to bear upon the mystery ? To what purpose ? Gaythorne might be found and brought to justice. I should have revenge on the man who had wronged me. Yet no—hardly that. What recompense could the law give me ? It could only disgrace him ; nothing more. No real vengeance could be mine unless I took the law into my own hands and shot him like a dog. And Edith——

Then round me flocked those devils again, and, almost driven mad by their temptations to put away such resolutions, I strode back through the woods, and gained the lawn by the side of the house. The gardener was still pottering about the flower-beds, but when he saw me he left his work and came towards me.

I stood waiting for him.

"What is it, Withers ?"

"Well, sir, I forgot to mention it when you were talking to me just now, but some of the servants had a fright last night."

I grumbled out an interrogation. Was I never to be free from this endless chain of mystery?

"It's not my business, sir; but I thought I might mention it."

"Yes?"

"You know the well, sir?"

I nodded.

"Some of the servants were out that way last evening," continued Withers, "and one of them declares that she saw a man open the door of the shed and peep out, going back directly he saw them. It might have been fancy, you know; but as there are some funny things happening about this old house, it might not be."

The well in question stood at the edge of the wood which bordered on the lawn by the side of the house, and was covered by a black-painted shed, looking more like a gardener's tool-house than anything else. We had never used it, as there was another well close to the kitchen buildings, which was more convenient, and contained better water we were told. I had never even had the curiosity to inspect this disused one. I believed I had ordered the shed to be taken down when the house was being done up; but it had been forgotten, and I had taken little notice of it beyond knowing that the key was kept in my writing-table drawer in the library, and that nobody ever went there.

"Nonsense, Withers!" I said rather angrily. "Why, the door is locked, and the key is in my possession!"

"That's just what I said, sir; but the girl says she saw him plainly enough."

"Did she know the man?"

"No, sir."

"Never seen him before?"

"Says not, sir."

"It might have been someone near the shed. Perhaps your boy, Withers?"

"Couldn't have been, sir. Yesterday was Sunday, and he wouldn't be up here."

"Well, whoever it was he could not have been inside the shed, because the door is locked."

"She says he was, sir."

"Why, man, if she said she had seen the devil there you would believe her!"

"Don't know that; but I might if she said she had seen him about this place."

I looked at the man in surprise.

"That's so, sir," continued the gardener, evidently understanding my look. "This house has been haunted for years, and I never heard tell of an angel haunting a place."

I might have argued that point with him, but I saw that he implicitly believed the girl's story, which I didn't. Still, it might be another of Gaythorne's devices. He knew well enough that the place was never used, and my wife knew—ah! not my wife—she could have nothing to do with it. He could find the key for himself.

"Wait here," I said after a moment's reflection; "I'll go for the key, and we will look at the place."

Edith was arranging some vases of flowers in the hall as I entered, and I stood for a moment to admire her graceful figure as she bent over her work. In her presence I felt ashamed of the foul thoughts I had allowed myself to meditate over.

"I have been looking for you," she said, standing back to criticise the arrangement of the blossoms. "Where have you been?"

"Only in the garden talking to Withers about those beds you

wanted altered. He has been telling me that someone was in the well-shed last night, and I have come for the key to go and look at the place myself."

I had not intended to tell my wife, but some irresistible power made me, and, moreover, made me watch what effect my words had upon her.

She looked at me in surprise.

"Someone in the well-shed ! Why, the door is locked. It is impossible !"

Surely she is innocent, I thought, and my heart beat a little faster for joy ; but those devils tormented me again—"She is only acting—clever acting, that is all."

"One might easily find the key," I said.

"Who could ?"

I was silent, and I felt as if her eyes were looking into the very depths of my soul.

"The servants do not know where it is," she continued ; "only you and I know. Who could possibly take it ? Wait, I will see if it has been moved."

She went to the drawer of my table in the library. I followed her.

"Here it is."

She held it up for my inspection, and its rusty condition did not give it credit for having done recent work.

"Give it to me. I'll go and look at the place."

"One minute," said Edith ; "I'll get my hat and come too."

This was awkward. I did not want her. I was not myself in her presence now ; and, besides, she might be coming to keep watch over my actions. Perhaps I had hit upon the very key-note of the mystery. However, I could not very well go without her, as in another moment she was standing by my side.

Withers was waiting where I left him, and in answer to Edith's questions, repeated the story as we crossed the garden.

The well-shed stood on the edge of the wood, and was visible from most of the windows on that side of the house. It certainly required a bold man to choose it as a hiding-place, especially if it were his intention to come out before dark, as he had done.

"It's locked, sir," said Withers, trying the door, and shaking it violently.

"Of course ; I knew it. Look at the key. It hasn't been used for years."

"There might have been two keys," suggested the gardener.

"Yes ; the door might have been open, but it isn't," I answered testily, putting the key in the lock, whilst Edith looked on with an expression—half concern, half amusement. I put both hands to the key, expecting to find difficulty in turning it ; but to my surprise the bolt shot back easily with a slight grating noise, and the door swung open.

"Turns rather easily after so many years, doesn't it?" said Withers ; and I felt that he was laughing at me.

It did. There was no use in denying it. The lock had been well kept, and when I pulled the key out there were signs of oil on its rusty surface. This fact gave some colour to the servant's story. Could Gaythorne have been here last night ? No ; the girl would have recognised him. Yet he might have accomplices.

The interior of the well-shed was not inviting. Huge cobwebs, covered with the accumulated dust of many years, hung in every corner, and from every beam. As the door swung open, some rats scuttled into their holes. Many worms and insects of every description crawled about the rotting floor as if they had suddenly been awakened to life by the light of day shining in on them ; and a faint, damp, earthy smell pervaded the place. Over the open mouth

of the well stood the rusty old windlass, which had broken away from its support on one side, and the bucket, rotten like all its surroundings, was drawn up close to the wheel. Part of the rope lay in a tangled mass upon the floor, and part hung in tatters down the well. Altogether it was a most dreary spectacle, and except for the oiled lock, there was ample proof of the long disuse of the place.

Edith gave a perceptible shudder as we three stood looking in.

"What a ghastly place!" she said after a pause.

"Don't go in," I said, catching hold of her arm as she was about to enter. "The floor looks likely to give way."

"Somebody was here last night, so it can't be very dangerous," said Withers. And to prove his entire belief in the story, he went in boldly and stamped up and down the boards to test their soundness.

This being satisfactory, we followed him.

The well was commonly supposed to be one of the deepest in England, and, although I cannot vouch for the truth of this statement, I know that when I dropped a stone down, it rang from side to side for a considerable time before a faint thud told that it had reached the water. It was an extremely dangerous place. There was not the slightest protection, and the flooring projected about a foot over the well on all sides, so that the mouth was about two feet wider in diameter than it appeared to be, judging by the opening in the floor.

It was only by holding on to the supports of the windlass that one could look down with any degree of safety, and as I did so I could see the glimmer of the water below, looking no wider in circumference than the rim of a tumbler.

Having inspected the well itself, I turned my attention to the shed, and minutely examined all parts to see if there were any sign

of its having been recently occupied, or of its having any connection with the house. But in vain. It was an uncanny-looking hovel, but presented nothing beyond what might be expected of a place so long shut up.

"I shall have this well and shed done away with," I said. "It's unsightly and it's dangerous."

Edith was silent, apparently engaged, as I was, in trying to find a clue to the mystery. Certainly there was nothing suspicious in her behaviour.

"Look here, sir!" exclaimed Withers suddenly. "This looks as if someone had been here."

He had been groping about the shed, and was now stooping down in one of the corners and pointing to the floor.

At first I did not see his reason for saying so. Only a crushed worm or two lay on the spot he indicated. But it dawned upon me a moment afterwards. The worms had been trampled on, and not by our feet, for we had not been in that particular corner.

"Somebody walking over here squashed those worms," said Withers. "The girl's story was true, Squire."

Yes, I could doubt it no longer. Of course, it was possible that the worms had been crushed in another way, but they had been killed recently, and Withers was probably right, and if Withers, the girl.

Then came the question. Who could have been in the shed last night? Involuntarily I turned to my wife, who was standing in the doorway. Did she know? Those devils were again tormenting me.

"Withers is right," she said innocently. "Shall we go and question Sarah?"

"Perhaps we had better."

"Come away, Teddie, and shut the horrid place up. I shall dream of it to-night. Who knows but that its late tenant may not have fallen down the well."

I locked the door and put the key in my pocket. Withers went down the garden with a satisfied smile on his face, and Edith and I returned to the house to examine the housemaid.

Little was to be learnt from her. She told us the same story—a little more fully, perhaps, and with a small panegyric on her own courage thrown in ; but it contained no clue.

“What were you doing out there in the evening ?” I asked somewhat severely, to the intent that, if she were concealing anything, she might be frightened into confessing it.

“Me and the cook, sir, were round there for a little walk after church. There was a bright moon, and I saw the man as plainly as I see you and the mistress now.”

“Did he go back suddenly when he saw you ?”

“Yes, sir ; but more as if he thought we hadn’t seen him than as if he were frightened.”

“Did you run away at once ?”

Sarah was rather indignant at my asking such a question, after she had taken such pains to explain her courage.

“No, sir. We walked quietly home.”

“And you saw no one else ?”

“No, sir. We watched some time from the kitchen door.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t your fancy ?”

“Quite sure.”

“Did cook see the man ?”

“No, sir.”

“And you did not know him ?”

“No, sir.”

Sarah could tell us nothing more. She was sure that she had seen a man there, and so was I now ; but what he was doing, and who he was, she had no idea.

Ought I to go to London, and leave the place surrounded by so

many suspicious circumstances? Five women would be of little use if there was a plot to plunder the Manor. I had no man living in the house, as the coachman lived with his family over the stables, which were in another part of the grounds, and the gardener lived in the village.

I told Edith that I thought I should give up the idea of going to town at present.

"You must go, Teddie," she answered. "We shall be all right, dear. I am getting used to this place, and I dare say Sarah's story is the result of imagination. Withers seemed much impressed at finding those dead worms, but I don't see that it is a very conclusive piece of evidence. Anyhow, I don't suppose anyone will run away with us, whatever else they may do."

"Run away with you!" I exclaimed, astonished at her appropriate remark to my thoughts. "Who is going to run away with you?"

"Why, dear, what is the matter? You look quite fierce. I said 'I do not suppose anyone would.' Do you think I would let you go away if I thought there was any danger?"

"I shall not go to-morrow," I said, and I watched her as I spoke.

"Oh, but you must. You have made all arrangements; and it will only be for one night."

"I believe you want to get rid of me."

"Teddie!" and two sweet arms were round my neck in a moment; two dear lips kissed me tenderly; two lovely eyes filled with tears of silent reproach.

My wife false to me? Never, never!

Then came those devilish voices again: "She is false!" "She is acting!" "Fool to put your trust in a woman!"

CHAPTER VIII.

LATER in the day I walked to The Wheatsheaf in the hope of finding Vincent there. To him I could open my heart as I could to no other, for, in spite of my anger at his conduct towards Edith, I felt that he was sincerely anxious for my happiness. He had meant kindly towards me, and had paid the penalty by being expelled from the house.

The public room of the inn was deserted when I entered, rather to my surprise, for Redfern generally drove a thriving trade with the fishermen, and I had to call several times, and thump vigorously on the counter, before the landlord emerged from his private parlour.

He came out wearing a leather apron and brightening a pewter pot with a duster, which occupation was suspended, however, when he saw who his customer was.

"Cleaning?" I said interrogatively.

"Yes, Squire."

"Has Captain Vincent been here to-day?"

"This morning. He was waiting nearly an hour for you."

"What a nuisance!" I said. "Is he likely to come again this afternoon?"

"No, sir. He's gone away."

"Gone away!" I exclaimed. "Gone away where?"

"To London," answered Redfern shortly. "He told me to tell you, if you came, that he might not be back for some days."

I was silent. Somehow I felt more lonely without Captain Vincent to tell my woes to.

"Was that all he said?" I asked after a pause.

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you. Good-day," and I left the inn.

His absence was most unfortunate at such a time. I never felt so much in need of his advice as I did now, and, having reckoned upon it, it was rather trying to be thrown back upon my own judgement as to what course I should pursue. One false step might ruin everything at such a critical time.

Thinking deeply, and not caring very much where I went, I walked through the village towards the beach. The village street was absolutely deserted by the male part of the population. One or two women were to be seen at the cottage windows, or in the gardens spreading out clothes to dry, but I am afraid I took very little notice of the curtsies they dropped to me, and I dare say they all agreed in considering me a very unsatisfactory sort of Squire.

Having arrived on the beach, I sat down in the shelter of a large boulder of rock, lit my pipe, and gazed pensively at the broad expanse of ocean, beautiful in the light of the afternoon sun.

I do not know how long I had sat there when my attention was suddenly attracted by the sound of voices. The rock against which I was sitting projected some ten or twelve feet towards the water, the projection forming a rough kind of wall which joined the mass of the boulder at right angles. In one of these angles I had taken up my position, and it was evident that the owners of the voices were making for the other. Had I stood up I could have looked over, but I remained seated and silent, being struck by the first words which fell upon my ears.

"Very strange this unaccountable noise up at the Manor House, isn't it?"

The speaker and his companion had by this time reached the adjacent angle, and I heard the shifting of the shingle as one of them sat down. The other apparently remained standing.

"Very. They say in the village that the Squire won't stay long. Is that true?"

"I should say it is not true. Mr. Wade is hardly a man to be frightened by trifles, and I fancy he will find out the mystery before long."

"You forget, Mr. Gaythorne, that a good many have tried to do so before, and have failed."

I started at hearing Mr. Gaythorne's name spoken, for I had not recognised him by his voice. His companion I knew to be "Drunken Jim," and I also knew that he was sober—the first time, I think, I had ever known him to be so.

"Yes; but you know success always comes to those who wait for it," returned Gaythorne, and I thought there was a tone of persuasion in his voice.

"Does it?" was the interrogative reply, and then there was a long silence.

"I should like to find out the secret," continued Jim at length; "I dare say it's a very simple thing, after all."

"Yes," was the careless reply; and then, after a moment's pause: "It cost one man his life."

There was a clattering of the shingle, as if Jim had started back at the words.

"Whose life was that?"

"Old Morsland's. He was found dead by his own fireside, you know."

"Oh, you speak of the old man who committed suicide six or seven years ago. Poor devil! I don't wonder; anyone would get tired of the life he led."

"Jim."

"Sir."

"Old Morsland never committed suicide; he was murdered!"

"Murdered !"

"Yes."

"Who says so ?"

"I do."

"And who murdered him ?"

I waited with bated breath for the answer to that question, and it seemed a very long time before Gaythorne answered.

"I don't know ; but I can guess."

"So can any fool," laughed Jim derisively ; "and he might go on guessing until he had fixed it on every man in Leak. I thought you were going to let me into a secret, Mr. Gaythorne. Don't you fear, sir. There ain't no secret about it at all. The old man killed himself safe enough. Why, didn't we have a detective about here for weeks, and he gave it up. It was suicide, sir—suicide."

"I don't think so."

"The detective said so."

"But he didn't think it."

"How do you know that ?"

"He told me so himself," answered Gaythorne. "He confessed that he was unable to find a clue to the murderer ; but he proved conclusively to my mind that Mr. Morsland could not possibly have committed suicide. The detective wasn't satisfied, and I shouldn't be surprised to see him back again some day."

"Satisfied !" ejaculated Jim. "Of course he wasn't. No man who's wrong ever is."

Again there was a long pause.

"Jim."

"Sir."

"Would you give me a helping hand ?" said Gaythorne suddenly, as if he had just thought of the question.

"Ay, sir ; tell me how."

"I'm going to try and find out this secret without Mr. Wade knowing. I have reasons for doing so. I am going to begin in earnest, perhaps to-night, perhaps to-morrow night, perhaps a week hence. Will you help me?"

"Ay, sir. How are you going to begin?"

"By keeping a watch on the Manor House."

"Without the Squire and his wife knowing?"

"Yes," answered Gaythorne with some hesitation; "without the Squire knowing. I might let Mrs. Wade into the secret. What do you say?"

"I'll help you; but——"

"But what?"

"You won't get me to lurk about the Manor House."

"Why not?"

"The place is haunted. Down here in the village I'll do what I can, but not up there."

"Then you won't help me in the way I want you to?"

"Can't, sir."

"Frightened—eh?"

"Yes."

"Of what?"

"Spirits. Old Mr. Morsland's ghost."

Gaythorne laughed heartily at the sailor's superstition.

"Then I must do the business myself," he said.

And a few moments afterwards I heard the sound of retreating footsteps.

It was Jim who had gone, for I heard Gaythorne say presently:

"Frightened—but not of Mr. Morsland's ghost, my friend. There is a more human object of fear in your eyes. Anyhow, I have learnt one thing—I cannot trust anyone in the village. Mrs. Wade and I must manage it between us."

He lit a cigarette, and went slowly across the beach towards the village.

"Devil!" I hissed, when he was out of hearing. "So you would get this fellow to help you to steal my wife. Wait. I will be even with you yet; and if—if I catch you—— Ah no; I must not think of that."

But I did think of it, nevertheless. I knew that if I caught him I should shoot him. For a long time I sat there developing my plans with that minuteness of detail with which a murderer might trace his scheme of crime, and his way of hiding it when it was accomplished. There was something hideously delightful in the thought of having this villain in my power, and I think I understood then, for the first time, why there may be so little horror to the murderer in the fact of taking away a fellow-creature's life.

Presently I became calmer. The conversation I had overheard decided me on one point. I made up my mind to go to town and to return unexpectedly the same night, so as to reach the Manor House at eight o'clock or a little after. That was the hour Gaythorne had appointed for the meeting with my wife, and, much as I hated the man, I could not help muttering:

"Heaven help him if I find him there."

In looking back at those days, I know that I was as near a madman as a sane person can be; and I tremble even now, when I think of what might have happened had things turned out differently.

That night, in the seclusion of my dressing-room, I took my revolver from the drawer in which I always keep it, and looked to the weapon carefully. I loaded all its chambers, and smiled to think of how deadly a work it was capable. Little did Edith dream as she lay asleep, a half smile playing on her lips, how I drew back the

curtains of the bed, and stood watching her, one hand grasping the hangings and the other holding the loaded revolver; how I wondered whether it would not be best to kill her as she slept, and to put an end to my own miserable existence afterwards. Little did she know what might have been her fate. And as I watched, she smiled more distinctly in her dreams.

Impulsively I bent down and kissed her, whispering in her inattentive ear :

"Darling little one—may Heaven forgive you if you wrong me. May Heaven help me if you desert me. Forgive me if you are innocent, and if you are guilty, think sometimes of the love you once gave me. Good-night."

CHAPTER IX.

LONG before Edith was awake next morning I was driving to Axminster, my nearest station. There was an early train, which would get me into London in time to do most of my business, and enable me to catch a train back in the afternoon, so as to arrive in Leak about eight o'clock.

It may seem strange to the reader, and I have often thought it so myself since, that I should have gone to London at all. It would have been quite easy to have pretended to go, and to have kept away from the Manor House until evening. My business was not particularly urgent, and I had little heart for it under the circumstances. Perhaps I felt that I must do something, for I believe that if I had been idle that day I should have lost my reason. However, the fact remains that I did go, and, moreover, managed to do my work as well.

On arriving at Axminster I reminded my coachman that he was

to sleep at the Manor House that night, as I had previously arranged; and having seen him drive off on his way home again, I went to the station-master and asked him to have a trap waiting for me, as I should return that evening, which he promised to do. I have no doubt he wondered at the great care I took of my horses.

As I have said, I managed to get through my business in town, and five minutes before the afternoon train started I was at Waterloo.

I made my way to a first-class carriage, and, having got comfortably settled in a corner, was congratulating myself upon having an empty compartment, when, as the train began to move, a man jumped in and called out to the porter who ran to close the door after him :

“Any change for Axminster?”

“No, sir—goes right through.”

“Thanks.”

Hearing him ask for Axminster, my attention was drawn to him more than it otherwise would have been, and since he was to be my travelling-companion I took stock of him. He was a man of about the average height, with a sharp and shrewd face, and although he did not look particularly robust or square set, he gave one the idea of having a considerable amount of strength and endurance.

I am not as a rule inquisitive, but somehow this individual roused my curiosity, and I began speculating as to his business and position. His dress told me nothing. It might have been the Sunday costume of an artisan, or the rather careless dress of a gentleman. I put it down to the latter, as he was travelling first-class, and because his face was a clever one and his hands had not the appearance of having done much manual labour.

His luggage consisted of a small portmanteau and a heavy overcoat, which he had carried over his arm. These he deposited on the

seat beside him with great precision, and, opening a newspaper, was soon absorbed in its contents, without, so far as I knew, even glancing at me.

I followed his example, and unfolded my paper, but I could not settle down to read. I had too much to think about.

We had travelled a good many miles of our journey, and I had almost forgotten his presence, when he suddenly aroused me by asking if I objected to smoke.

I replied in the negative, and took out my cigar-case.

"That is proof enough," he said, proceeding to light a pipe. "Smoke makes a journey much less tedious."

"Yes. You are going to Axminster, are you not?"

"Yes."

"Then we shall be companions to the end, for that is my destination."

"Very pleased," was his answer. "I like company."

The ice once broken, we continued to talk on different subjects, and I found him a most agreeable companion. Although a little brusque in his manner, his conversation was extremely interesting. Had I not had such a terrible weight at my very soul I should have enjoyed that journey. As it was, he served to take me out of myself a little.

I do not know how it was he led up to the subject, but we presently began to talk of old houses and superstitions, and he told me of a case in which a very curious mystery had been explained in a very simple way. Of course this subject greatly interested me.

"Superstition is all nonsense," he said, summing up some of his former remarks. "Several cases have come under my own notice where an old chimney, or an old disused passage, has been the cause of ghosts, mysterious noises, and any number of wonderful sights and sounds."

"Indeed ! It is rather refreshing to hear you say so."

"Why ? Are you a superstitious individual ?"

"I was not once ; but when one lives in a house where there is an unexplained mystery, and, moreover, one which baffles all attempts to get at the truth, it tends to make a man become so."

"May be," he replied. "Do you live at Axminster ?"

"No ; but about six or seven miles away. Close to Leak."

He gave a little grunt.

"My house is a very old place," I continued ; "and it certainly is a puzzle to me how the sounds which haunt it are produced."

"I should like to see the house."

"You are perfectly welcome to come and look at it," I said ; "and if you can make a discovery you will have my deepest gratitude. That is my card."

He took it, and looked at it.

"Oh, Mr. Wade, of the Manor House ! A very fine place."

"You know it then ?"

"Yes."

I looked at him in some surprise, wondering whether his face ought to be familiar to me.

"And do you know me ?" I asked.

"By name. I was aware that a Mr. Wade lived there."

"You have probably heard of the mystery then ?"

He laughed a little.

"Everyone who reads the papers has," he said. "The death of a Mr. Morsland, who lived there some years ago, caused great excitement at the time."

"I do not wonder at it," I said ; "but I do not study the papers very deeply."

My companion was silent for a few moments, and looked at me

curiously, wondering, I suppose, how any man had courage to confess that he took so little interest in the daily papers.

"The story might have added to its charm in some people's eyes," he said at last.

"Not in mine. I prefer a house free from such fixtures.

"It would have kept you away—eh?"

"Hardly. My agent really ignored the subject, though I heard the matter mentioned in the village."

There was a short pause, during which my companion looked steadfastly at me as if he were undecided what question to ask me next.

"Did you know this Mr. Morsland?" he said at length.

"No."

"Then your fancy about the Manor House being 'haunted' does not come from the knowledge of his tragic end?"

"Certainly not."

"From hearsay, perhaps?"

"No. I should not believe in that. It comes from personal experience," and I told him shortly what had happened that night in the library.

"You interest me very much," he said when I had finished, and then he looked vacantly out of the window for some time, apparently thinking it over. Presently he continued:

"Was your wife very much frightened?"

The question startled me. It was asked as if some suspicion of her had formed itself in his mind. It was strange in a disinterested person. However, I was not going to let him think ill of my wife.

"Yes. It was only natural."

"Quite so. In the library you say this happened? Wasn't that the room where Mr. Morsland was found dead?"

"Yes. He killed himself there, I believe."

"Killed himself!" exclaimed my companion. "Where somebody killed him, you mean."

"Do you think he was murdered, then? They say he committed suicide."

"I don't think at all; I know he was murdered. It would be impossible to commit suicide in the way he was supposed to have done it."

A cold shiver ran through me. This man's opinion struck me more forcibly than the same opinion had done when Gaythorne had given it to Jim.

"I should like to put my hand on the right man," he said with a sinister expression. "It is always so pleasant to catch a clever villain."

"It is," I said vehemently, as I thought of the object of my journey, and my hand went to my breast-pocket, where lay my revolver ready for use—a messenger of revenge.

"Doubtless you know Mr. Gaythorne," said my companion suddenly, looking out of the window as if he were thinking of something else. I was glad that he did not look at me, for I am certain my face must have shown some of the hatred I had in my heart for the man he named.

"Yes; he is often at my house."

"Really! Then we may meet again. Mr. Gaythorne's is my destination."

"You are a friend of his?" I asked in astonishment. And I believe I laid a little stress on the "his." He did not correctly interpret the emphasis.

"Oh yes. We are old friends. Capital fellow is Gaythorne."

During the journey I had taken a great fancy to this man, but as I heard him talk of my enemy in terms of friendship and affection, a revulsion of feeling set in, and I almost hated him as I

did the other. Perhaps this man had been asked by Gaythorne to help him ! If not, why was he going to Gaythorne's house, when Gaythorne would have gone ? Heavens ! What a web of infamy and mystery was woven round me, and not a single thread rested in my hand by which I could unravel it.

"Did Mr. Gaythorne ask you to come down, then ?" I asked after a pause, fixing my eyes on him as I spoke.

He did not answer at once, but returned my gaze with interest. Perhaps he thought the question an impertinent one. Then he said :

"No ; I am going down on chance."

There was no actual hesitation in the answer, but I felt that he had told me a lie.

We both lapsed into silence after this, and the train rattled on to its destination, bearing me to revenge, and my companion either to sin with, or mourn the loss of a friend.

When we arrived at Axminster it was quite dark, and a fine drizzling rain was falling which made the place look very miserable and desolate. The street of the little town was deserted, save for the few passengers by the train, and they hurried away as fast as possible. Happy men ! Each had doubtless a cheerful home to go to, and a fond wife to give him welcome ; and I—nothing.

"Have you got a trap for me ?" I asked of the station-master.

"Yes, sir ; from The Rose and Crown. I told them you would send it back to-morrow."

"All right ! You had better come with me," I said, turning to my companion, who was standing beside me, his bag in his hand and his coat over his arm. "You are not likely to get any other conveyance to-night."

"You are very good," he said ; "but I ought not to presume on your kindness."

"Nonsense ! Put on your coat, and let us be off. I must be at the Manor House by eight o'clock."

"You'll have to drive hard to do it, sir," said the station-master. "The train was late, and it's full twelve minutes past seven now."

"I will do it."

"Don't let me take you out of your way, Mr. Wade," said my companion, jumping into the trap. "You can put me down at the old finger-post. It is nothing of a walk from there."

"You seem to know the road," I said as I took the reins.

"I do pretty well."

Calling a "Good-night" to the station-master, I laid the whip sharply across the cob, and he started off down the muddy road as fast as he could go.

CHAPTER X.

THE rain, which began to fall more heavily as we proceeded, practically put an end to all conversation, for beating as it did in our faces, it made it wise to keep our mouths shut, and to button up our coats as high as possible. Besides, it was as much as I could do to drive. The night was moonless, and our road lay between high trees, which effectually shut out any dim light which might have existed in the open. To reach Leak in time I was obliged to keep up the horse's pace, and I had to be very careful to keep him in the road, as a sudden curve might land us in a ditch with a lame animal and a broken carriage.

As we neared Leak, I turned to my companion, who was sitting huddled up in his coat, with his hat drawn over his eyes, and chewing a partly-smoked cigar, which had gone out soon after we left Axminster, and which he had not attempted to re-light.

"I shall not be able to put you down at the finger-post," I said, "because I am going straight into the village."

"That is not your nearest way home, surely."

"To-night it is."

"Very well. Don't trouble about me. One place will do as well as another."

In spite of his being Gaythorne's friend there was something I could not help liking about the man. He was such a cool and collected individual, and, by his utter indifference as to what hour he arrived at his destination, I came to the conclusion that he was not a party to his friend's crime. I felt, moreover, glad of his company.

Presently the lights of the village shone out mistily before us, and as if he were conscious of his journey's end, and well aware that a good meal was awaiting him, the horse quickened his pace.

Since I had become convinced of this man's innocence, as far as any league with Gaythorne was concerned, I had turned over in my mind whether it would not be as well to tell him the object of my journey. It would be pleasant to have a companion in my arduous undertaking.

"You will not find Gaythorne at home to-night," I said. "I know he is out."

"Really!" and there was evident surprise in his voice.

"He does not expect you, you say?"

"I said so."

"Then will you walk across to the Manor House with me? I am going to leave the trap at the inn."

"Oh no, thanks. I have intruded upon you too much already."

"Not at all. Will you come? I have a special reason for asking."

He was silent, evidently waiting for an explanation.

"The fact is, I am returning home unexpectedly this evening,"

I continued. "I believe I am about to discover a clue to the mystery of the Manor House. Ask me no questions now; if I am right, you will know all within an hour. Will you come?"

After a moment's hesitation he answered in the affirmative, and I felt a certain part of the load taken off my shoulders. Who could tell but that perhaps before to-morrow I should be guilty of a fellow-creature's death! It was something to have a companion. He might prevent me from committing a crime. He might help me in some way.

I purposely refrained from telling him that I expected to find Gaythorne at my house. He would probably connect my suspicion with him, and would very naturally refuse to play the spy on a friend he implicitly trusted.

We pulled up in front of The Wheatsheaf. The door was shut, on account of the wet night I supposed, and nobody was loitering in the road outside. There was a light burning in the bar, however, and before I could call for anyone, my companion had jumped down, and was endeavouring to inspect the interior through the opening between the blind and the window-frame.

"Devilish quiet for an inn at eight o'clock in the evening," he muttered, going to the door, and thumping at it heavily with his fists.

"Open it, man; it's never locked," I said, going to his side.

"It is locked, because I have tried it." And he continued his thumping.

After a few minutes a bolt was drawn, and a young fisherman opened the door to us.

"What the——" began the man in a surly voice; but, recognising me, it changed at once. "Good-ev'ning, Squire."

"What's the place locked up for? Where's Redfern?" I asked angrily, entering the passage,

"Gone out, Squire."

"My horse wants putting up for the night."

He seemed rather surprised.

"Horse! Yes, sir; I'll send the boy round. I'm taking care of the place for Redfern."

The fisherman called the boy, and we went into the bar for a moment, my companion suggesting that a glass of whisky would do us no harm after our wet drive, and would fortify us for our walk to the Manor House.

One man sat in the bar—drunken Jim; and it was evident, at a glance, that he was fast approaching that stage when his legs would refuse to do their office. He was propped up against the wall, one arm deep down in his breeches-pocket and the other thrown affectionately round a half-filled pewter pot, which stood on a little table before him. He did not recognise me, and I took no notice of him. My companion acted differently. He looked at the man critically for a moment, and then seated himself close to the drunkard and looked steadily into his face.

"He's mostly like that, sir," said the fisherman in charge of the inn, pouring out our whisky.

"Is he? That's why you lock up the house, I suppose. It gives him an opportunity of having all the liquor to himself."

The fisherman looked at the speaker angrily, but did not answer.

"Poor devil!" continued my curious friend. "He only began this sort of thing a few years back. Jim!"

I was startled to hear him call the man by name. He was evidently well acquainted with Leak and its inhabitants.

The drunkard, who had at first taken no notice of the man beside him, now turned and looked at the speaker. As he did so, he took the pot in his hand to drink; but, gazing at his interlocutor, an expression as of an unpleasant recollection came over his face, and he

continued to hold the pot half way between his lips and the table.

It was altogether rather a strange picture. The hard, sharp face of the one, set with a firm determination, whilst the glistening eyes held their victim in very much the same way that a snake charms a bird ; and the drunken, yet half-conscious expression of the other, looking as if the man had suddenly seen something of the past which he had forgotten rise up before him.

"Jim," he said again, "do you know me?"

As he spoke he placed his hand on the drunken man's shoulder, and in an instant the spell was broken. The pot dropped from his hand, and, muttering something which might have been a prayer or an oath, he staggered to his feet.

There was a pause. He steadied himself by the table, and looked first at the fisherman, then at me, and lastly at the man who had wrought this marvellous change.

"Curse you!" he exclaimed hoarsely. "Let me go. It was suicide, I tell you—suicide."

And with an effort he staggered to the door of the bar, and thence into the street.

"That's good," ejaculated my companion, emptying his glass of whisky at a draught. "Hallo, friend, you seem astonished!"

This remark was addressed to the fisherman, who had watched the scene with open mouth, and held the whisky-bottle in very much the same manner as Jim had held the pewter pot.

"Yes, I am," he said shortly, and turned his back upon the speaker.

"That poor fellow is a slave to drink. I should fancy, fisherman, he drinks to drown a trouble—eh?"

"Likely. I don't see how it concerns you, though."

"No? Look here now ; what's his trouble—eh?"

"Dead wife."

"That's strange. I've heard of a living wife being a trouble to a man, but, as a rule, they don't say that of a dead one. Does she haunt him?"

"Haunt him!" repeated the man, turning round and looking at the speaker.

"That is what I said."

"How do I know?"

"He might become confidential in his cups, fisherman."

"He might—yes."

"Dead wife, you say, troubles him?"

"Yes. His grief makes him drink."

"Oh! Did he tell you so?"

"No."

"You guessed it—eh? Very clever. So he drinks to try and forget that his wife is dead. Queer notion that. Poor soul! She would be very pleased if she could come back and look at her wreck of a husband now. Come, Mr. Wade, time is getting on. Look here now, young man. Never you drink to drown grief like poor Jim. You'll get confidential one day, and may be you'll find your confidences put you in an awkward position."

With which piece of advice my companion buttoned up his coat and went towards the door. I followed him, quite in the dark as to what he meant by his last remark.

It was close upon half-past eight when we left the inn, and crossing the village street, we set off across the downs at a quick pace. It had ceased raining now, but great wreaths of sea-fog curled over the surface of the grass; not that we could see them exactly, because the night was dark, but we could feel them. Now we were enveloped in a wet mist for a few moments, which seemed to strike down to our very bones. Then we passed through it, and were com-

paratively dry until we entered another cloud. I have said it was dark. Such an expression hardly describes that night. Some black fluid seemed to have been mixed with the atmosphere, and as, when one shuts his eyes and presses his knuckles into them, strange light shadows appear to flit across the vision, so, in this blackness, fantastic forms seemed to pass in front of us, vanishing the faster the more we tried to follow them with our eyes. Not a sound, save our heavy tread on the wet turf, broke the stillness, and there was to me something almost ghastly in the utter absence of ordinary noises. Probably the feeling was due to the excited state of my nerves.

"You seem inquisitive to-night," I said, after we had walked some distance in silence; and I spoke more for the sake of company than anything else. "First you try to look through a blind-covered window, and then you nearly frighten a drunken man into a fit."

He gave a short little laugh.

"Inquisitive—eh? Well, yes. I've been noted for it for many years."

"It might lead to very disagreeable consequences."

"It very often does," he answered, chuckling. "If you ever know me better, Mr. Wade, you will understand why."

"You will never make me believe that it is a wise proceeding."

"Think not?"

"Never."

"But I might find out the mystery of your house that way."

I could not see the speaker's face, but I could hear that he chuckled more than ever at his own conclusions. Indeed, he continued to do so at intervals as we hurried onwards.

A curious fellow, I thought. He would be a very good character to introduce into the next story I write. Write! No, I should never write again. After to-night my whole life would be changed.

I felt that conviction take hold of me, and penetrate to my heart as the fog penetrated to my bones. What interest would there be in my work now? No wife; no home; nothing in existence to care for.

And with these thoughts the whole misery of my situation forced itself upon me. Even at this moment Gaythorne might be uttering his final persuasions to induce Edith to desert me. Perhaps she might refuse to go when she found herself looking at her home for the last time. Fired with this maddening idea I quickened my pace, almost forcing my companion into a run to keep up with me.

We had reached the top of the down, from which point the path descends direct to the Manor House gates, when he placed his hand on my arm.

"Am I going too fast?" I asked rather testily.

"Well, you do seem to forget that my legs are about half as long as yours, but I didn't stop you for that."

"Well?"

"I've got something to say."

I grunted an interrogation.

"About that drunken fellow."

"Yes?"

"Look here now, Mr. Wade; he is the keystone to the mystery of the Manor House yonder."

I stood still upon the pathway.

"I don't understand you," I said.

"No? Think for a moment of what he said: 'Let me go. It was suicide, I tell you.'"

"What of that? He was drunk."

"You're quite right—he was; but have you never heard of drunken men talking sense, and of their saying in liquor that which, out of it, they would dread to put into words?"

"Perhaps—sometimes."

"Look here now, Squire ; he was thinking of old Mr. Morsland's suicide."

I started at the suggestion.

My companion laid his hand confidentially on my arm.

"Mr. Wade," he said slowly, "that man knows that Mr. Morsland was murdered, and I fancy he could tell us who murdered him."

CHAPTER XI.

A FEW moments later we stood at the gate leading into the gardens of the Manor House. A curious trick of memory carried me back to the day Edith and I had entered it in company with Captain Vincent, wondering at the legend which was attached to the old place, and looking at its overgrown and dilapidated grounds with a feeling akin to awe. Then we were happy, trusting one another perfectly, and only anxious to settle down away from the rush and turmoil of life to be all in all to one another. Now how different it was. I was like a thief upon my own property, stealing in with a man I half liked and half disliked, but whom I could not understand ; and for what purpose ? As my conscience asked the question, my very soul seemed to shrink and shrivel into nothingness, and my better and finer nature was ashamed at the hideous thoughts and feelings of my coarser one. The devils who had tormented me so long showed themselves in all their terrible reality for a moment, which was intensified by my being brought face to face with these terrible fears at the threshold of the house where I had expected to cultivate peace. And then came the question, what did I intend to do ? My hand pressed against the breast-pocket of my coat, and there was the answer. I carried

with me a short and certain messenger of death, and I knew I should use it.

"Why do you stand waiting here?"

My companion's voice broke in upon my reverie, and I started as if I were guilty of a crime. I opened the gate quickly and we went in. The gate creaking a little on its hinges, the light fall of the latch, and even our stealthy tread on the wet gravel, sounded marvellously loud in the prevailing stillness. Stillness! Everything was not still, but the very sounds were more ominous, more awful to me, than silence. The faint rustling of the pines, the sound of the drops as they fell from the saturated branches on to the dead leaves below, were to me, in my nervous condition, like the whispers and footfalls of evil angels.

The house looked almost desolate. A faint light glimmered through the hall-windows and sent out a fitful ray into the night. That was all. There were no other signs of life, and all the other windows were dark.

Had I come too late?

I was about to hurry forward, when my companion stopped me.

"Sh—h—!" he muttered beneath his breath, and I felt, rather than saw, that he was pointing towards the house.

My heart gave a great bound and then stood still for a moment.

"What is it?" I said, straining my eyes to discover the reason of his sudden exclamation. I could see nothing but darkness and the glimmer from the light in the hall.

"Someone is moving there in the shadow of the house."

"I'll soon know who it is," I said, and in a moment the revolver was in my hand.

"Not that—not that!" he said hurriedly, holding my arm in a grip like a vice. "There is a better way. Wait here."

He left me ; and I stood, revolver in hand, endeavouring to make out objects in the darkness.

Suddenly a figure crossed quickly in front of the dimly-lighted windows, disappearing in the gloom on the other side, and a moment afterwards another figure, which I took to be that of my companion, crossed in pursuit of the first. I wanted to run forward and join him, but my feet seemed chained to the ground. I could not move, but kept my eyes fixed on the light, feeling certain that, if another figure crossed it, I should fire.

I seemed to have been standing there a long time, but it was probably not more than a minute or so, when my companion came back.

"I could not catch him," he said.

"Who was it?"

"I don't know—a man! Mr. Wade, there is foul play going on here."

"Yes," I answered mechanically. I do not think I quite understood what he meant, or what I was saying either.

He took my arm, and we walked quickly and silently up the drive. He was as excited as I was now.

As a rule the front-door was left open all day, and at nightfall was generally closed, but could be opened from the outside by turning the handle, or, if it had been latched, by a key. The last thing at night it was always locked and bolted.

We crept towards the door.

I tried to turn the handle whilst my companion endeavoured to see inside the hall through the stained-glass windows.

The door would not open, and I was obliged to replace my revolver and fumble in my pockets for my keys.

I put the key into the lock and turned it, but the door was bolted and barred,

I muttered an oath under my breath.

"We shall have to ring," I said in a whisper to my companion.

"No, no ! We can get in the back way ; surely the servants have not all gone to bed."

"No," I said with hesitation ; "but will it be wise to leave the front of the house unguarded ?"

"Quite safe. They won't leave by the front-door. Come along."

He crept away like a shadow, and went unguided to the servants' part of the house. I followed.

When we got in front of the kitchen-windows, which were lighted up, he stopped.

"Mr. Wade."

"Yes."

"Are your servants trustworthy ?"

"I have always found them so."

"Good ! One thing more. When we get in, do not let anyone leave the kitchen. We will go by ourselves into the front part of the house."

Having consented to this proposal, which seemed a very natural one, I knocked gently at the door. My companion stood close behind me as if he expected some attempt would be made to injure me as soon as the door was opened.

With the least possible delay my knock was answered by one of the servants, and we stood in the kitchen.

"Lor', sir !" exclaimed the cook, in undisguised astonishment ; "who thought of seeing you to-night ?"

"I'll go and tell the mistress," said one of the girls, making for the door as she spoke.

"You needn't trouble," said my companion, going to the door, so as to effectually prevent her exit ; "your master and I will go ourselves,"

There was something impressive in the way he spoke, and the tone of his voice had a great deal more of the command in it than the wish to save the girl trouble. I noticed it, and the servants noticed it, for the curious looks of enquiry, which had at first been given only to me, were now directed to him. The girl herself looked as if she were inclined to ask him what right he had to interfere, and indeed would probably have done so had I not been present. He was master of the situation, and motioned me with a look to follow him.

"One moment," I said, turning to the coachman, who had risen from his chair by the fireside as we entered. He doubtless wondered why I had told him to remain in the house all night if I intended to return. "Peters, have you been in the house all the evening?"

"Yes, sir."

"Since when?"

"About six o'clock, sir."

"Who locked the hall-door to-night?"

"I did sir," answered the housemaid.

"You bolted and barred it at an unusually early hour then," I said.

"Mistress told me to do it, sir, about an hour ago."

I winced a little. I couldn't help it.

"Is your mistress alone now?"

"No, sir. Mr. Gaythorne is with her in the library."

"Mr. Gaythorne!" I said. I knew what the girl's answer would be when I asked the question.

"Mr. Gaythorne!" exclaimed my companion. Our eyes met as we simultaneously uttered the name of his friend, and my enemy. The genuineness of his exclamation convinced me that he had no part in his friend's villainy, but I saw that he was trying to read my

thoughts, and I fancied that he rather distrusted me. Probably he guessed who it was I suspected, and why I was returning to the Manor House so unexpectedly.

There was a moment's silence.

"What time did he come?" I asked.

I don't know why I asked the question, for of course I knew the answer.

"About eight, sir."

"We are losing time, Mr. Wade," said my companion.

I crossed the room, and leaving the servants in utter astonishment at our sudden entrance and mysterious questions, we went towards the hall, making as little noise as possible. I think I had become calmer now than when I first entered the gardens of the Manor House; but I once more took my revolver from my pocket, feeling certain that I should use it before another five minutes had passed over my head.

When we reached the hall I stopped.

A confused sound of voices came from the library, and although I could not hear a word that passed, for the door was too thick to allow that, the conversation was evidently a hurried one, and also, apparently, a quarrelsome one.

My companion had stopped, too, and then after a moment's pause we were both seized with the same idea, and crept towards the library-door, our ears set to catch a word of the mumbled sounds if we could, and our nerves strung to the highest pitch of excitement.

Thank Heaven, we had not come too late.

Suddenly there were distinct sounds of a struggle. Some piece of furniture was thrown over, and there was a crash of glass, as if one of the windows had been smashed. I put my hand on the handle of the door, whilst my companion stood close to me, a fixed, deter-

mined look upon his face ; and then I noticed for the first time that he, too, had a revolver in his hand.

A horrible thought rushed into my brain. Could he be deceiving me ? Could they be escaping at this very moment, and he had led me round the back of the house on purpose to assist that escape ?

“Open the door !” he hissed.

I tried, but it was locked, and then, as I threw myself against it to try and force it open, the terrified cry of a woman rang through the house.

Heavens ! It sent the blood back to my heart as cold as ice, for it was my wife’s cry, full of terror and agony.

Assisted by my companion, I redoubled my efforts to force the door, and the heavy frame and panels creaked and groaned under our united weight.

“Open it, you devil !” I shouted. “Open it, or by——” I did not finish my sentence.

Again that cry rang out, and was stopped suddenly as if by someone putting his hand before her mouth. Then came the sounds of more struggling ; then shriek after shriek, terminating in one long call of despair to me :

“Edward ! Edward !”

In spite of the agony which rang in my wife’s cry—agony produced by terror or pain, I knew not which—I could not help a great tongue of fiery hope leaping up from my heart and penetrating through every nerve. In it her innocence rang out, and I knew that her love was mine still.

Those shrieks brought all the servants into the hall, but I took no notice of them. I was like a madman, and, seeing that the door resisted all my efforts, I seized a small heavy chair which stood near, and aimed blow after blow at the upper part of the door, whilst my companion kicked at the lock with all the force he could muster.

Our efforts were not in vain.

With a sudden vibration the lock gave way, and the door swung open just as I was striking another blow, so that I was literally hurled into the centre of the room before I well knew what had happened. In a moment my companion had closed the door, and stood with his back against it to prevent anyone's exit.

The precaution was perfectly unnecessary. The room was empty.

CHAPTER XII.

As I had stood in that room once before with Gaythorne and Edith, wondering at the sounds which haunted it, certain that someone had spoken to me in the darkness, so I stood now with my strange companion, utterly perplexed and bewildered. But there was something even more terrible in my position. Before, the room was in order, the voice had whispered into my ear alone, and therefore might have been the effect of imagination. Now it was different. It could not be imagination. My wife had gone—vanished. The room was in disorder. A lamp, which had stood on a table in the middle of the room, was thrown down, and the oil was slowly soaking into the carpet. One or two chairs were overturned, and a small table at the end of the room, on which a lamp was burning, was pushed out of its place and stood against one of the bookcases.

I looked round the library like one in a dream, unable to offer any suggestion, and my companion, who remained for some time with his back against the door, was just as astonished as I was. What was I to do? That my wife had been in the room the moment before we entered I knew. That she had mysteriously disappeared

was just as certain. I was perfectly dazed and quite unable to realise what had happened, and even if I had had power to think calmly, it is a question whether I should have been able to arrive at any decision as to what course to pursue. Had I determined to pull the house down brick by brick I could not have commenced such an operation at once, and, although it seems strange to me now that I did not think of doing so, I know that at the time such an idea never entered my head.

My companion was the first to speak.

"Empty—eh?" he said, leaving his position and coming to my side. "Strange. The windows shuttered, too. Very strange."

"Yes."

I said "Yes" because the tone of his voice implied that he expected some answer.

"Very strange," he repeated. "I'll tell the servants that it's all right and get them out of the way."

To tell the truth, I had thought nothing about them, and he left the room without any interference on my part.

In a few minutes he returned, saying that he had given them some explanation, and that they were going to bed almost immediately. Then he walked leisurely round the room, looked behind the curtains, and in every corner, crevice, and recess that a cat would have had difficulty to hide in.

"I've never been so puzzled in my life," he said, when he had completed his round. "The author of this trick is very clever."

"Trick!" I exclaimed.

"Oh yes, certainly, it is a trick of some sort; but it is immensely above the average of modern mysteries."

"Some disused passage or old chimney," I suggested.

I did not mean to be sarcastic in reminding him of the

explanation of all those things which he had given me in the train that afternoon ; but he turned upon me sharply.

"I still stick to that," he said, with a smile which was peculiar to him.

"Is it a sliding panel, do you think?" I said presently, remembering how Gaythorne had tried them once before.

"Oh no. Every panel in this room has been inspected more than once. They are all sound. Hallo! what is this?"

He went towards the fireplace, and picked up a piece of linen which was lying on the floor. He examined it carefully—turned it this way and that, and then held it out to me. I could see nothing interesting in a square of some coarse material, looking more like a large, common pocket-handkerchief than anything else.

"Not much of a curiosity," I said, giving it back to him. "May be a piece of my wife's work."

He shook his head doubtfully.

"Or belongs to one of the servants," I added.

He did not appear to think so.

"Anyhow, it is not very strange to find a handkerchief lying on the floor," I said rather shortly.

It was rather annoying to have my common-sense suggestions received with a dumb negative.

"Humph!" he grunted, and put the article in his pocket.

I was perfectly broken-hearted at my failure to catch Gaythorne, and I threw myself upon the sofa to reflect on my position. It was a very unsatisfactory one ; but there was a ray of brightness in it. Edith had called for me. Perhaps she had never intended to leave me. "Fool, to trust in a woman!" hissed my tormenting devils; but their bitter words hardly wounded me now. Still, I was in an impenetrable jungle of doubt, and I felt that I must do something to end it. But what? I was absolutely helpless, and, unless some clue were found

to the mystery, I must always remain helpless. It is impossible to help or to take vengeance when people are not—when they have vanished altogether.

During this reverie, my companion had stood by the fireplace, apparently interested in watching the oil from the broken lamp spoil the carpet. He was a curious individual, but I was very glad to have him with me.

Suddenly he turned to me.

"I thought I heard a window being smashed when I was outside," he said. "It was evidently this lamp being thrown over."

"Probably."

"And this lamp could not have been burning at the time, or the oil would have caught fire," he continued.

"Yes."

"Therefore the people in this room were working by yonder lamp, Mr. Wade. It doesn't give much light in this part of the room; perhaps their work lay at the other end."

I started from my reclining position. The deduction was a clever one.

"You are right!" I exclaimed.

He gave a satisfied grunt, and we went to the little table on which the burning lamp stood.

As I have said, it was pushed up against one of the book-cases, and this was inspected in a very business-like manner by my companion.

"The top of this cabinet has been broken, I see."

"Yes; it was so when I took the house."

"Oh yes; I know it wasn't done to-night."

And he continued his inspection in silence.

"Are all these books real?"

"Nearly all. A few at the top and at the ends of the shelves are 'shams.'"

He commenced from the top, and took every book from its place.

"One of these might communicate with a secret spring," he said.

But it was in vain, and, having finished, he sat down and looked puzzled.

Again the ugly thought that this man was Gaythorne's accomplice crept into my mind. He had spoken of him as a friend. What could they have in common with one another? Was he acting?

He looked at me and smiled, and the smile was a very honest one.

"We have been beaten, Mr. Wade; but only just."

"The defeat could not very well be more complete," I answered, with a sickly attempt at a smile.

"There I don't agree with you," he said. "I think our night's work has been to very good purpose, and although you perhaps have failed in what you intended to do, I fancy my part has been rather successful."

I looked at him, and he saw my astonishment.

"Come, now," he said, leaning forward in his chair. "Shall we be perfectly honest with one another. You told me enough on our journey here to interest me, and I probably did the same by you. We have both been acting up to now, and I think we shall help one another better if we both speak out."

I did not answer for a minute or so.

"My trouble is rather a delicate one to tell a stranger," I said at length. "There are some episodes in a man's life which ought to have their being only in his thoughts. They have no right ever to pass his lips."

"True. It is a pity people do not more often act upon such a principle."

I nodded.

"A little silence is so good that I prefer to keep silent now."

"Ugh!"

And this short grunt was all the response I got for some considerable time.

"I honour your idea, Mr. Wade, but supposing I show you that your trouble is already known to me, will you consent to be perfectly honest with me?"

I looked aghast at him. How could this man know my secret? Only Captain Vincent had heard it from my lips?

I answered in the affirmative.

"Well, then," he began slowly, "you have a house with a mystery; but at the present time you care very little about that, except in so far as it concerns your wife."

I was silent.

"I see I have hit the truth," he continued, after giving me time to answer, and he smiled at his own sagacity. "She is gone, and of course you think she is gone with Gerald Gaythorne."

"Who told you all this?" I asked, startled at hearing my secret so accurately told.

"I have found it out by degrees. When we were in the kitchen your manner put the finishing touch to my conviction."

"You are right," I returned. "Until to-night I thought my wife was going to leave me of her own free will. It is only from hearing her call to me for help that I have changed that opinion. Now I believe she is innocent, and that she has been forcibly stolen from me."

"You think by Mr. Gaythorne?"

"I do."

"I don't."

The denial was a decided one, and I looked at him for some explanation.

"You heard the servant say he was here to-night?" I went on.

"Oh yes. I do not doubt for a moment that he was here."

"You are a friend of Gaythorne's," I continued, "and it would be out of place were I to detail to you all my reasons for coming to this conclusion. I give you my word of honour as a gentleman that I have not jumped to it. I would not make such an accusation against any man without a very solid foundation."

"I am certain of that, Mr. Wade; but mistakes will occur."

"Mistakes—bah!"

This man had such a way of treating everything I said with contempt that he made me angry.

"Listen to me, Mr. Wade," and he got up from his seat and began pacing the room as he spoke, "I quite agree with you that your wife is innocent; but it is a fact that she has vanished, and, I feel sure, has been forced to leave this house to-night."

"By Gaythorne," I said.

"No; with him if you like, but not by him. Read that."

I took the letter which he held out, and read as follows:

"DEAR SIR,

"You doubtless remember the murder of Mr. Morsland at Leak some few years back, and how I promised to let you know if I heard of any fresh clue. Something has happened. The house is now in the possession of a Mr. Wade, who is a very nice fellow, but has curious ideas about this affair. I am doing my best to get to the bottom of the mystery with the help of his wife, who is of the same opinion as myself. Come down at once. Mr. Wade goes to London on Tuesday, I hear, on business; I may find out something that night.

"Yours truly,

"GERALD GAYTHORNE."

"Now, Mr. Wade," he continued, when he saw that I had finished

reading, "by that letter, and by little things which from time to time have found their way to my ears concerning this house of yours, I came down with the distinct idea that you were the chief worker in this trick."

"What !"

He smiled at my startled exclamation.

"You see we have been suspecting one another."

I was silent.

"I was wrong. I believe in you perfectly now; but you see how easy it is to make mistakes, and to give way to premature suspicion."

My conscience pricked me at the rebuke.

"The mystery at present is as dark as ever, but it is perfectly clear to my mind that there is some foul and evil plot working in and around this house. What it is, and what is its object, I am not prepared to say, but the key lies in this room. At present I am baffled, completely checkmated, but I shall win presently."

I looked at him in wonder.

"I tried to discover it," he continued, "when old Mr. Morsland was found dead in this very room with nothing to account for his death. The door was locked on the inside, the windows were closely shuttered, yet he was dead, and I know he died by violence. I failed to convince the jury then, however, and since that time I have not been idle. Everything of importance that has happened in this village I know, and I feel certain the time of my triumph is not far distant. By your leave, Mr. Wade, since my friend Gaythorne has disappeared, I shall take up my abode here for the present, and I think, if you will allow me, I shall send to Axminster the first thing to-morrow morning for two or three policemen in plain clothes. We may want them."

Certainly this man's assurance was prodigious. Although he

had said he would be perfectly honest with me, I had no guarantee that he had been so, and I rather objected to have my house treated as if it were an hotel.

"I do not want to thwart you in any way," I said ; "but isn't it rather—well, rather an unusual thing for a stranger to invite himself in this way?"

He was not in the least angry, and appeared to think my remark a good joke.

"True," he said. "I am so used to being cautious that I had forgotten. There is my card."

I took it rather curiously, and read :

"Henry Thurlow. Scotland Yard."

"You will understand why I have not given it to you before," he said. "I am a detective."

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. THURLOW said he was accustomed to be cautious, and my connection with him during the next few days proved to me that he spoke of himself correctly.

He was up early next morning, and had thoroughly inspected the premises outside, and in, before breakfast. He had been down and examined the well-shed, had talked to the servants and gained what information he could out of them ; and, although his early work had apparently borne no fruit, he seemed perfectly satisfied with it. During the morning I sent my groom back to Axminster with the trap I had borrowed, and the detective sent a note by him to an official in Axminster, in answer to which three policemen were in the house before evening, without a soul except myself knowing of their advent. Of course I gave Thurlow *carte blanche* to do anything

he liked which might lead to the unravelling of the mystery; and, having impressed upon me the necessity of keeping the object of his visit a secret, which I promised to do, he left me to my own devices.

Time hung very heavily on my hands that day. Every moment I felt more strongly that I ought to be up and doing something; but what was I to do? I was perfectly helpless, and my only consolation was that I had got a detective in the house, who was evidently determined to do his best. Still, it was a very poor consolation. I have never felt my life so utterly empty, so absolutely devoid of all interest, as I did that day; yet through all my misery there ran a thread of hope, just as a thread of gold may run through a fabric of sombre hue. Look at such a fabric in any light, and there will always be an impression of brightness; so with my sorrow. However dark it appeared to be; however much I endeavoured to realise its awfulness; the thought, the certainty almost, of my wife's love for me lent it a brightness.

About mid-day, one of Gaythorne's servants came over to see me. He was anxious to know what had become of his master.

"He left home about seven o'clock last evening," said the man; "and he has not returned."

I was going to tell him what I knew, when I remembered the promise I had made to Thurlow. It would be safer not to give this man food for gossip.

"I have not seen him," I said.

"I am certain he said he was coming here last night," said the man.

"Well, I did not see him; nor do I know where he is now."

This was absolutely true; and the servant went away, wondering what he should do next to find his master.

Late in the afternoon I went out, and walked across to the village, hoping to find Vincent there. He might have returned from London, and possibly have something to tell me which would throw a light on the doings of the preceding evening.

It was dark and stormy. The wind whistled monotonously amongst the trees in the avenue, and blew in a regular hurricane across the downs. Walking was difficult, and I was constantly obliged to stop and take breath, and pull myself together before facing the storm again. Far out to sea the waves broke into foam as they rolled heavily in towards the shore ; and overhead the black clouds sailed fiercely, dropping rain whenever the wind abated for a moment.

Arrived at The Wheatsheaf, I heard by the sounds which proceeded from the interior that the bar was full. I did not feel inclined to face a lot of fishermen to-night, so I turned into the private parlour, the door of which stood open, and determined to wait until some of the customers had gone before I enquired for Vincent.

I was tired, and throwing myself into a chair, I fell to thinking of the morning Edith and I had breakfasted there on the occasion of our first visit to Leak. I was happy then, and the morning was a lovely one ; I was miserable now, and, as if in sympathy, the weather was dark and stormy.

How long my reverie had lasted I do not know, but presently I became conscious that it was getting darker, that I had been sitting there a long time, and that voices were talking in a high key in the adjoining bar.

"What I say is simply this," I heard one say, in tones husky and hiccoughey from excessive drinking : "I've done a deal of work for you—dirty work, too, as every man Jack of you knows—and it ain't fair that I should be sent adrift."

"Can't you make less noise?" hissed another voice, which I recognised in a moment as Captain Vincent's.

"No ; I've got something to say, and I'll say it out," returned the first speaker with an oath. "I'm an honest man, and——"

He was interrupted by a derisive laugh from the other inmates of the bar.

"You may laugh, mates, but I am an honest man as far as I go," he continued. "I've taken service in a queer profession, but having undertaken it, I've gone through with it, and not one of you can say I'm lying."

He waited to be contradicted, but everyone was silent.

"Why, then, am I chucked overboard without the means of getting a living? Come now, Captain, tell me that."

"Nothing easier," replied Vincent, in a low but perfectly audible voice. "Drunkards are rather dangerous; and when I call you a drunkard no one will say I am overstating the case."

A murmur of approbation followed this speech.

"Maybe not," returned the other, whom I now recognised as Jim. I had often heard Vincent have a battle of words with him before. "Let that be as it may, you had better keep friends with me."

"I fail to see the necessity. What you say in drink no one would take any notice of; and what you say in your sober moments no one would believe."

"Think not!" exclaimed Jim impudently. "How about Mr. Wade and Mr. Gaythorne? I fancy they would listen to me."

A storm of fierce oaths followed this.

"Have you forgotten the penalty?" said a voice.

"No, mate ; I ain't forgotten anything. But I must live."

Hearing my name mentioned in this manner, I became doubly

interested, and advanced cautiously to the parlour door to catch every word of the conversation.

"What are you talking about?" said Vincent fiercely.

"Business, Captain, that's all. I must live; and if I can't live your way, I must live my own."

"Your own! What's your way?"

"Honestly, mate. The same as I used to live afore I entered your service. D'ye see? We ain't all masters, but we've all got tongues."

"And you'll——"

"Yes, Captain, that's it. If I ain't to be your man I must get a berth somewhere, and that other ship ain't far off. Throw me over, and I'll blab!"

"No, by Heaven, you sha'n't!" exclaimed Vincent in a fury.

"How'll you prevent it?" said the other with a chuckle.

"So—and so—and so!" was the answer, and three fearful blows were followed by a heavy fall.

This was too much for me to hear and be silent; and not well understanding what Jim had said worthy of the chastisement he had evidently received, I went into the bar, and entered upon as curious and revolting a scene as could well be imagined.

In the centre of the floor lay Jim, apparently unconscious, his face, which always showed the effects of drink, covered with blood, and over him stood Captain Vincent, perfectly livid with passion, his fist clenched as if to deal another blow as soon as the prostrate man revived. Leaning behind the bar was Redfern, smoking as unconcernedly as if what had just happened was quite a common occurrence. Two or three other men stood round, looking as if they had risen from the benches round the wall when the blows were struck, and something of the Captain's expression was on each of their faces. The fallen man was evidently in the minority, and not

a hand or a voice had been raised in his defence. One man in particular had the face of a devil, full of malignant hatred and vengeance. He had his right hand inside the scarf which was round his waist, apparently clutching some hidden weapon, and was bending forward as if to rush at the fallen man.

"Say the word, Captain, and——"

"Not yet. Presently, perhaps."

"You deal out very heavy punishment for a very slight offence, Captain," I said, as I stood in the doorway.

I had taken in the scene I have described at a glance, and no one saw me before I spoke. Now every face was turned to me, and there was no mistaking the fact that they were all alarmed at my sudden intrusion. Vincent was the first to recover himself.

"It does these sort of men good to have a thrashing now and then, Squire."

"It does—it does," said the men in chorus, with a half-hearted chuckle, resuming their seats and re-lighting their pipes.

"Give him some water, Redfern," continued the Captain, after a moment's reflection. "He will think twice before insulting me again. Do you want me, Mr. Wade?"

He put his arm through mine, and led me back to the parlour.

"What does all this mean?" I enquired, when he had closed the door, and we were alone.

He laughed airily at my question.

"You are like all Englishmen—always ready to stand up for the defeated."

"Not all Englishmen, Captain, surely. Your action to-night seemed to be in accordance with the wishes of the majority."

"Yes; I lost my temper. I stand reproved. Did you hear all the conversation which caused me to knock him down?"

The question was asked carelessly; but my confidence in my

friend had been rudely shaken, and I determined to be cautious and keep my own counsel.

"No ; I only came to the door in time to see the punishment."

He looked at me searchingly for a moment, and then continued :

"When dogs bark unadvisedly we give them the stick, do we not ? That was my position when you found me thrashing that cur yonder."

"And his offence ?"

He paused a moment before he answered, with some hesitation :

"Insolence to me, Mr. Wade. However, it is over now. Perhaps I ought to have been more considerate, as he was half drunk. What did you come here for to-night ?"

"To see you," I answered, going to the window, and thinking of what had just occurred more than of my object in coming to look for him.

"About Gaythorne and your wife ?" he said interrogatively.

I paused a moment before answering. I had promised the detective to keep last night's experience a profound secret, and I intended to stick to my promise.

"No," I returned slowly ; "I came to ask if you had heard anything."

"You forget. I have been in town. Did not Redfern tell you so ?"

"Oh yes, I remember. When did you return ?"

"To-day."

We were both silent for some time. Presently he came to my side at the window.

"My dear Wade, you take this thing too much to heart. Of course I know that the discovery of that letter has been a great blow to you, but you must be a man. Show her that in trifling with your honour she has justly forfeited all claim to your consideration."

"That would not be easy," I answered, wondering what he was going to advise me to do.

"Why not? She has disgraced you; you have a perfect right to disgrace her."

The room was dark fortunately, for my face grew crimson with passion at his words. But knowing now my thorough faith in Edith, I led him on to talk. My idea of the man's character was changing with every word he uttered.

"Disgrace her!" I said. "How?"

"Let her know, let everyone know, that you have done with her for ever. It will only be your righteous revenge. You thought her everything that was honest, and you loved her. You find her exactly the opposite, and you hate her."

"Excuse me; I have not found her either dishonest or unfaithful."

My words were dignified and unexpected by him. He was surprised at my sudden conversion.

He put his hand on my arm.

"What! Have you been thoroughly reconciled? I am very delighted!"

"Yes. I regret that I ever allowed myself to think such base thoughts; I have also let you say and think too much. But my ideas are perfectly changed. I know my wife is innocent."

I should have liked to have told him why.

"You see," I went on, "I am certain of her innocence; but were it otherwise I should endeavour to shield her from the world's reproaches."

"We should act differently, Mr. Wade. I admire your nobility of character, but I am afraid I could not copy it."

There was a pause.

"By-the-bye, one more question, and then I will never

mention the subject again. Concerning that torn letter I gave you ?”

I started. I think he noticed it.

“If I remember rightly, the meeting was to have been last night. Was it held ?”

“I believe so ; but I was away from home at the time.”

A few minutes afterwards he said “Good-night,” and left the room and the inn.

When he had gone I called for the landlord.

“Is that man all right again ?” I asked as Redfern entered.

“Yes, sir. Mighty drunk, but otherwise right enough. He’ll die a sudden death, Jim will.”

“Who says so ?”

Redfern looked surprised at my question.

“I say so ; and the drink’ll do it.”

“Has he gone ?”

“Yes, some little time back.”

“Thank you—good night.”

I stood in the passage a moment after the landlord left me, and I heard him say as he entered the bar again :

“The Squire’s just clean off his head, mates. It was a bad day for us when he took the Manor House.”

CHAPTER XIV.

My visit to The Wheatsheaf that night gave me ample food for reflection in my lonely walk home.

During that day I had been turning over in my mind what I could do to help my wife, and to discover her whereabouts ; and I was obliged to own to myself that I could do absolutely nothing.

Thurlow was my only hope. Now another path had opened up before me—indistinct, it is true, but enough to show me that my affairs were connected in some way with the people at The Wheat-sheaf that night.

As I walked on slowly, the scene I had witnessed was enacted over and over again before me—the savage action and malignant expression of Captain Vincent ; the faces of those who were delighted to see the drunkard thrashed. Jim had been severely punished—for what? His words forced themselves upon me, gathering more importance the more I thought of them. What was it I should be so ready to listen to? What circumstance could affect both Gaythorne and myself, who were perforce the bitterest of enemies? Surely there could only be one answer to the question—my wife's disappearance and the mystery of the Manor House. If so, why had Captain Vincent, who had always expressed himself so anxious to learn the truth, struck the speaker as if to silence him for ever. Could Gaythorne be innocent? Then where was he? Where was my wife? Who had stolen her from me? Was Captain Vincent a villain?

These doubts and speculations seemed to follow and fit into their places so naturally, that my feeling against the man I had always considered my friend increased at every step.

Fool that I was! Why had I left the village without seeing Jim and learning the secret which concerned me so closely?

Stay! It was not too late to turn back. Once an anxious face would have watched for my coming on such a night as this, but that was in the past. Great Heavens! only to think that every hope and ambition of my life had suddenly become empty and valueless like the buds nipped by a frost in early spring. I had come here to find absolute peace. I had found utter desolation!

So I turned back and began to retrace my steps, but had not

gone more than two or three hundred yards when the object of my search met me.

"I was coming to look for you, Jim," I said.

He had been running, and was out of breath.

"Squire," he panted, "I saw you leave the inn, and I followed you. But I am watched. I want to tell you something. Will you take me home with you?"

"Come, you can tell me as we go."

"No, no. We must be quite alone."

I did not see where we should be less likely to be overheard than on the downs, and told him so."

"You don't understand," he said, almost in a whisper. "I was followed all the way from the inn to-night; but I have managed to escape for the present, at least. I'm thinking, Squire, that if I had run up against any of them, I should have been lying as stiff as may be by this time."

I shuddered, for Redfern's words that he would die suddenly, came back to me. Was this man's silence so necessary that it would be safer to kill him than to let him speak? His must be a very terrible secret; and I felt, perhaps, a little nervous as he walked silently beside me, casting an anxious glance behind him from time to time to make certain that he was not being followed.

It was a relief to me when we reached the Manor House, and I led the way to the library at once, longing to hear the man's story.

He would probably tell me only half the truth; for if his knowledge was so great, he must have been a conspicuous worker in the plot, and fear of his former accomplices would make him reticent.

Mr. Thurlow was seated at the writing-table when we entered, engaged in looking over some papers. He looked up, and Jim

seemed inclined to turn back. Indeed he might have made a hasty retreat had I not been too quick for him and locked the door.

Thurlow rose from his seat and came forward.

"Have you come to help us?" he asked, fixing his eyes on Jim in somewhat the same manner as he had done on the occasion of their meeting at The Wheatsheaf.

"Squire."

Jim turned his back upon the detective and faced me.

"Yes."

"I said I had something to say to you alone."

"Well?"

"This—this gentleman; will he go?"

"He is as interested in the secret as I am. You need not be afraid to speak before him."

"I said to you alone," persisted Jim.

"Let us be honest, Jim," said Thurlow, laying his hand on his shoulder. "You know me—I know you. We will make a bargain. If you help me to solve this mystery, I will undertake that you shall not suffer for the part you have taken in it."

The man turned and looked at the speaker.

"You swear to that?"

"I do."

"No matter what part I have taken in it?"

"It shall never be known, provided always that you tell me the truth, and all that you know."

"And you, Squire?"

"Yes," I answered. "If you help me, far from endeavouring to punish you for the past, you shall always find a friend in me for the future."

"I will make the bargain then."

There was something honest in his manner, and my hopes rose even higher than before.

"Did you hear all the conversation at The Wheatsheaf to-night?" he said, addressing himself to me.

"Only from the time my name was mentioned."

"That makes my story easier. You perhaps do not intend to believe all I say, but I swear on my oath every word of it's true."

I sat down and motioned him to continue.

"I've got a bad name in the village yonder, Squire, but there's many more who deserve it just as much as I do. When I married, nigh on ten years ago, I was as honest as you are, and it was my going wrong which killed the missus, though I've never owned it before. About seven years ago I first knew Captain Vincent, and since then I've been going faster and faster to the dogs."

"But Captain Vincent is my friend."

"No, he ain't, sir," he answered sharply. "He's no more your friend than mine. I lost my wife, and haven't you lost yours?"

"What do you mean?" I said, half rising from my seat with excitement.

Thurlow said nothing, but was paying the greatest attention to every word.

"What I say, Squire. There are a good many blackguards in Leak, but Captain Vincent is the greatest of the lot, and everything bad comes from him somehow or other. I ought to know, for I've had a good deal to do with him for some years."

"What have you had to do with him?" I asked.

Jim hesitated.

"You have promised to keep my secret?" he said.

"Yes, yes! Go on."

"It's rather difficult to tell so as to be understood," he went on. "You see, mine is only half a yarn, because I was only one of a

gang ; and the real object of the society is only known to the heads of it—Captain Vincent and a few others.”

“I thought so,” said the detective quietly.

Jim turned on the speaker quickly.

“Had you found that out?”

“Yes, partly ; and I guessed the rest. Come, go on. I want to hear the whole story.”

“What the secret object is, Squire, I never knew—don’t know now. Amongst the men in the village who were engaged under Captain Vincent it was supposed to be a smuggling trade ; and a goodish bit of smuggling has been done at times ; but there is more than that in it. Had I not taken to drink, I might have known all ; but as it is, I can only tell what several men in the village could tell as well—perhaps better.”

“Well?” said Thurlow in a tone of enquiry.

“This I do know,” continued Jim. “The smuggling was only a sham to hide a bigger game, and to employ men who might be of use in defending the secret of this village, should anyone attempt to discover it.”

“Well,” said Thurlow again, “and the bigger game was——?”

“I don’t know.”

The detective looked at him steadily for a few moments, and I saw that he believed what the man said.

“I only know this,” Jem went on after a short pause. “Captain Vincent was not the real head of the business. There were others he had to obey.”

“Is that all you can tell us?” asked Thurlow, evidently much disappointed.

“Yes, in a general sort of way ; but I came here to give you help, Squire, and to have revenge on the man who has ruined me.”

There was something very impressive in his words, and a

determination which made me think that his revenge would be thorough.

"My wife, Squire, was only a poor woman, but she was as dear to me as ever yours is to you. If I'd listened to her I shouldn't be here now. She was a bit religious, and when she somehow got to know that I was engaged in smuggling, she preached me a sermon I'll never forget. I promised to give it up, though I knew I couldn't, for I was bound by an oath which to break was death, and I lied to her to keep her quiet and easy. She never believed me, though she didn't say so ; and she got ill, and after a time she died."

I had not the heart to interrupt the fellow's story, although his personal history interested me little.

"If I'd never seen the Captain, sir, my wife would be living now. She's gone—dead. Hasn't your wife gone too?"

"Have you nothing else to tell me than this?" I asked him angrily.

"Answer me first, Squire. Hasn't she gone?"

"Yes, man."

"Then Captain Vincent took your wife."

"What for?"

"I don't know that, Squire ; but I can show you how."

"You can !" exclaimed Thurlow, with excitement most unusual to him.

"I can. There is a secret entrance from this house to the smugglers' cave, and——"

"Show it me—at once," I said hurriedly, interrupting him. "Don't you know that every moment is of vast importance?"

And I put my hands upon his shoulders to force him to speak.

"Not so fast, Squire. If I told you the secret, with only us three here, it would be just like killing ourselves. We must have more help ; then I will."

Had I been less excited I might have felt the truth of the man's statement, but as it was I only felt that he had raised my hopes to crush them, and my fury burst out accordingly.

"You have lied!" I hissed. "You want my protection because you have lost Vincent's. You——"

"Lied, have I? Wait; I will prove my words. Stand here."

He took me by the arm and placed me about midway between the door and the writing-table. Then, going to the door, he began to move stealthily towards me, and as he passed me he slightly touched my arm with his coat, and whispered in my ear the words I had such cause to remember:

"Leave this house; you are in my kingdom!"

CHAPTER XV.

I STARTED as if he had struck me. Here before me stood the "ghost" himself, proving Gaythorne's words that the whole trick doubtless emanated from someone in the village.

"Am I lying?" Jim asked after a pause.

I could not answer him. I stood dazed. He had told me the truth. Captain Vincent was a villain, and my wife was as innocent as on the day I married her. Where was she? Dead? Even so, it would be far easier to lose her that way than by her own free will. Dead! Why should I think of it? He could not be devil enough to kill her. No, no! Against everything I could hope on now, until I actually saw her dead at my feet.

"Am I lying?" said Jim again.

"No," I muttered. "Go on; tell me all."

"Not now, Squire. We are too few; I dare not show you now. It might mean death to all of us."

During this little scene Thurlow had sat watching us in silence. Now he got up from his chair.

"It must be now, Jim—to-night," he said quietly, but in a tone which was commanding. "We are not so helpless as you think. There are three policemen in the house at the present moment, and six resolute men are a match for double that number taken by surprise."

It was now Jim's turn to be surprised.

"You have sworn not to betray me," he said, and his voice trembled as he spoke.

"I have sworn, and I shall keep my promise, but you must do as I tell you."

"It may be death to us," said Jim earnestly.

"I will chance that," was Thurlow's cool answer.

"Am I to obey, Squire?" said Jim, turning to me. "It may ruin everything to show you at once."

"I command," said Thurlow in the same tone of voice, without giving me a chance to answer, and at the same time he took his revolver from his pocket, whether to intimidate Jim or to be ready in case of emergency, I do not know. "Now listen to me a moment," he continued. "The heads of this society which you know nothing about—how often do they come here?"

"Only now and then."

"When did they last meet?"

"I don't know. The last time I saw them was about a year ago."

"Is it likely that they have met since?"

"Yes; most likely."

"Now answer me this," said the detective, and there was a note of warning in his voice, as if to inspire Jim to tell the truth. "Have you any reason to believe that this secret meeting-place will be occupied to-night?"

"I don't know one way or the other."

"It might be, then ?"

"Yes ; some of the smugglers might be there."

"And that is the reason you are frightened to show us the entrance now ?"

"Yes."

"But there would be the same chance to-morrow night, or at any other time."

"Yes ; but we might have more help."

Thurlow took one or two turns up and down the room, still holding the revolver in his hand. Suddenly he stopped.

"Mr. Wade, there is a certain amount of risk in learning this secret to-night, but time is very precious. I am for chancing the danger. What do you say ?"

"Certainly ! Let us know the secret now."

"Good !" Thurlow was evidently pleased with my answer. "Would you be so good as to give my men a call ?"

The detective evidently did not like to let Jim out of his sight, and I do not think he believed all the man said.

I went for the policemen as Thurlow requested.

Jim seemed a little uneasy when the men entered the library. Perhaps he was as doubtful of Thurlow as Thurlow was of him.

"Now we are ready. Show us the secret."

We all stood with our revolvers in our hands.

Jim, after a moment's hesitation, advanced towards the mantelpiece, whilst we looked on with the keenest interest.

"This is the secret," he said.

Pressing a small piece of the scroll-work, he at the same time pushed the right support of the mantelpiece inwards.

"This scroll releases the support," he said in explanation ; "and the pushing in of the support opens the secret passage. See ?"

As he spoke the whole front piece of the deep hearth-stone was depressed a little, and then slid backwards without a sound.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE opening disclosed to us a narrow flight of steps, which were not particularly inviting, as they led down into utter darkness, and there seemed to be nothing but a narrow, dark vault below.

Thurlow was the first to make any remark.

"A secret staircase, eh! Very common things in these old houses," he said, as if he had known all about this hidden entrance to the room for years. "A more original idea, certainly, than a sliding panel."

I made no remark, and the policemen eyed Jim with distrust.

"Shall we go down, sir?" said Jim to me.

I nodded, and he began to descend, followed by the policemen, who were provided with bull's-eye lanterns. Thurlow and I brought up the rear.

When we had gone down a few steps Jim stopped.

"The hearth-stone is turned by this lever," he said, taking hold of a stout iron bar which was fixed to the side of the vault, and which ingeniously lifted and depressed the iron framework on which the stone slid backwards and forwards. As he spoke, he lifted the lever, and the stone returned to its place, leaving us in darkness save for the flash of the lanterns.

"It is better to shut it in case anyone is lurking below," he said in a whisper; "and it would be safer to turn off those lights."

The policemen did not seem inclined to follow this advice, but after a moment's hesitation Thurlow told them to do so, and we were left in total darkness.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten," counted our guide as we descended. "There are eighteen steps in all, with a broad stone slab at the bottom."

On reaching level ground, by his instruction we turned to the left at right angles to the direction of our descent, and went forward down a rather steep incline, for, I should think, about fifty yards, when the passage broadened, and it was evident that we were entering a large cave.

Our guide stopped.

"This is the main cave," he said. "In daytime it is dimly lighted by some holes which open into the woods between Captain Vincent's cottage and the Manor House, which have been so surrounded by brambles and brushwood artificially, that even if you were to search the woods you would probably never find them. Now it is too dark to see the holes, and even on a very light night you can only just see where they are. This cave extends some distance in front of us, and at the end there is a broad passage which leads down to the sea. There are two openings out of that passage. One is the entrance to a smaller cave, which is used as a meeting-place by the heads of the society, and the other leads to a small flight of steps like the one we have just come down, and is the entrance to Captain Vincent's cottage."

This explanation was all given in a whisper, and there was a reverential tone in the man's voice when he spoke of the society, as if there were something almost blasphemous in mentioning it to the uninitiated. I felt that the man was only to be trusted to a certain extent, and that either fear, or the conviction of the sin of having broken his oath, might make him betray us as he had betrayed his former masters.

"Captain Vincent's cottage!" I said in astonishment, when he had finished. "Surely we have not come far enough to be near it yet."

"No. The cave is large, and the passage to the sea is long. Have you seen enough, sir?"

"Not yet," said Thurlow in a low tone, but in a very decided manner. "We must learn the geography of this place. Let us go down the passage, and you can point out this second cave, and the entrance to the Captain's cottage."

"Shall I turn on the light, sir?" said one of the policemen.

"No, no!" said Jim. "It is dangerous. Listen!"

Of course, such a command made us all hold our breath, and my pistol was grasped more firmly in my hand. We listened, but not a sound could I distinguish except the beating of my heart, which seemed to echo in the darkness.

"There is nothing," said Thurlow, and the sound of his voice quite startled me. "Lead on, man. We must go on, now we have come thus far."

Reluctantly Jim went forward, and we all followed, touching one another for fear of being left behind and lost. As Jim had said, the cave was extensive, for we proceeded cautiously for some time before our guide stopped again.

"What is it?" I said.

Again that command of "Listen!" came, and again our ears were set to catch the faintest sound.

"We ought to be near the entrance to the passage," said Jim, and by the indecisive way he spoke, it was evident he was not quite sure of his way in the dark.

"Turn on the light a moment, Phillips," said Thurlow; and before Jim could say "no," a ray of light flashed out upon the darkness.

There is something exceedingly companionable in a light, be it ever so small, after wandering about in the dark for a long time, and I was glad to see the round disc of the lantern reflected on the sides of the cave.

The light was only flashed for a few seconds to enable us to see where the entrance to the passage was, and then was turned off again.

Of course, on this occasion of my first visit to the cave, I was not able to see much of it, but perhaps I had better describe its main features here. It was oblong, of immense length, but not very wide in any part, and not very high. Its sides in places were rugged and natural, but in many places they appeared to have been built. There were several dark holes which looked like entrances to other caves, and lying about, or perhaps I should rather say neatly arranged, against the sides were a number of cases and packages covered with tarpaulin.

The light turned down, we proceeded as before. Presently we stopped again, and I could distinctly hear the faint murmur of the breakers as they rolled in at the base of the cliff.

"We are close to the passage," said Jim in a whisper. "We must be careful. Can anyone hear anything?"

We all stood still and listened.

There was not a sound save the dull murmur of the distant ocean.

"Not a sound," said Thurlow. "Flash the light a moment, Phillips."

At the command the ray shone out again, and showed us that we were close to the side of the cave, or rather one end of it. Just in front of us was an opening which might have been only a deep hole for all we could see to the contrary. Against the wall were cases, and tarpaulin-covered heaps, as against the side all along the cave, and there were also several niches which had the appearance of having been hewn out of the solid rock.

I was taking rapid mental notes of all this when one of the policemen uttered a low exclamation. It was hardly more than a whispered one, but it was enough to arrest everyone's attention at

once ; and our eyes very naturally turned in the direction of the lantern's ray.

The round yellow patch of light rested upon a curious oblong box leaning in one of the niches I have mentioned. Personally I did not see anything so peculiar in it as to call forth the exclamation.

"A coffin !" said the man in a low, tremulous voice.

It was not really like a coffin, being merely a long narrow box with two thin planks apparently roughly nailed over it ; but the fact of it having given rise to the fancy—as I thought—in one man's excited brain made us all look at it curiously.

The very idea of coming upon a coffin standing up in a recess of a dark cave, which was at times the habitation of living men, was a repugnant one, and the very repugnance made us anxious to settle the doubt at once.

"I don't see the resemblance," said Thurlow. "Let us look ; that's the best way."

"Better not," said Jim. "You might knock something down, and a noise might betray us."

"I'll chance that," said the detective. "Give me the light, Phillips."

The policeman, who had held the light steadily fixed on the object which had startled him, gave it to Thurlow, and we all went forward with him.

I don't know whether Thurlow actually touched the box, or whether he trod on something which was lying near it ; but at that moment the planks, which, after all, were only leaning against it, suddenly fell forward, luckily on a coil of rope, which prevented their making a noise, and revealed to us the hideous contents of the long box. In this makeshift coffin was the body of a man. The face was very discoloured ; but the neck was even more so, there

being a livid, purple mark across the throat of perhaps an inch and a half in breadth.

Not one of us spoke for some time ; but we stood gazing at the corpse, fascinated by its ghastliness.

I cannot say what were the feelings of the men beside me ; but one horrible thought settled in my brain. My wife ! Was the same fate hers ? And for a moment my reason seemed to reel. If one person had been foully murdered by these incarnate devils, why should my darling have escaped the same fate ? Involuntarily I looked from side to side in the darkness to discover a similar box.

Thurlow was again the first to break the silence, which seemed to have lasted hours, so many fears ran through my brain in that short space of time. He spoke to me :

“Mr. Wade.”

“Yes.”

“Do you recognise that—that thing ?”

He spoke in a whisper, and his voice quavered a little. He could not look at the ghastly spectacle unmoved.

Half afraid, I looked more closely at the distorted face of the dead man, on which he let the light of the lantern fall steadily.

To me it conveyed no recollection of any living person.

“Eh ?” he muttered.

“No,” I answered. “Who is it ?”

“Isn’t it Mr. Gaythorne ?”

With a start, I made a sudden step forward. Yes. Great Heavens ! It was the man I had accused of stealing my wife !

My wife ! Before me was the man who had been with her on the night of her disappearance. He had been murdered. And where was she ? Was it not only too probable that she was lying dead and ghastly in some chest close beside me ?

I was about to seize the lantern from Thurlow’s hand, and hunt

in every nook and corner for that which I dreaded to find, when Jim, who was standing close beside me, caught hold of my arm, and uttered an exclamation louder than we had dared to make since we had entered the cave.

"Listen, listen! Put out the light! We are lost!"

The light was out in a moment.

The sound of voices was distinctly audible, coming from the passage which led seaward, and there was also a grating noise, as if a boat had been drawn up the rocky entrance. We all stood motionless.

"We are lost—we are lost!" moaned Jim.

"Silence, you fool!" growled the detective. "If you say another word I'll blow your brains out!"

CHAPTER XVII.

WE were only six, and it was evident that those who had entered were many. Noiselessly we crept to the side of the passage to escape observation if possible, Jim being between Thurlow and myself. I thought for a moment that Jim had played us false, but his abject terror soon dispelled this idea.

So we waited.

Presently a dim light, which gradually became stronger, lit up the dark passage, and the sounds of the voices grew nearer. With our revolvers in our hands we waited to sell our lives as dearly as possible.

From my position I commanded a view of, perhaps, ten yards of the passage. After that it took a curve to the right, and, as I afterwards discovered, another to the left farther on. It was something the shape of the letter "S," and had the passage been straight it would have opened out to the sea in very nearly the same place as

it did now. As the lights advanced I noticed that in the bend which I could see there was another opening similar to the one against which we were standing.

The lights glimmered on the stone walls for a few moments, and then a man, carrying a horn lantern, stopped in front of this opening, which led into the smaller cave Jim had mentioned. If he came no farther than that we were safe. He was followed by several men; I counted twelve, but it was evident that there were others who did not come up the passage.

They formed a curious crew, as unlike sailors and fishermen as they well could be. They appeared to be in ordinary dress, but the night was wet and cold, and they were all muffled up in great coats. I could not recognise one of them, but I felt pretty certain that Vincent was not amongst them.

The cave they had entered was not extensive, and I could see five or six of the occupants through the opening. It contained a long rough table, and at this they sat down, two or three lanterns being placed in the centre of the table. One man, who had the appearance of being chief amongst them, sat at one end, and I could see him well. He unbuttoned his coat leisurely; and took a bundle of papers from his pocket, which he began to examine carefully. He was an old man, grey-headed and wizened. His hands trembled as he spread out the papers before him, and he had to bend over them to read the writing. Two things were certain. He was not a fisherman, and he was not English. Of what nationality he was I could not tell. The others whom I could see were also enigmas to me. Two, I think, were English; one was certainly a German, clean-shaven and fat; and one was a Russian—a remarkably handsome and well-set-up man. He was quite young, but, as the old man referred some of the papers to him, I imagined he was of considerable importance.

The man I had first seen remained standing at the opening. Presently he held the lantern above his head to give more light down the passage, and a man came up with a quick step and entered the cave.

It was Captain Vincent.

There was no mistaking his walk and figure, although I could not see his face. When he had gone in, the sentry left his position and went down towards the sea. The others had evidently been waiting for Vincent, and as soon as he had taken his seat, which was on the side where I could not see him, the meeting commenced.

Every member rose from his seat, and drawing a small dagger from his side, kissed it and laid it upon the table in front of him. Then the old man said something I could not hear, but it was, I imagine, a question, for at the end everyone made a monosyllabic answer, but whether it was intended for "yes" or "no" I could not understand. The old man made several remarks in the same tone of voice, and after each the same answer was given. At a sign each man took up his dagger again, kissed it, and resumed his seat.

After this the work of the meeting began.

Heedless of danger, Thurlow entered the passage, and stood in the darkness as near to the entrance as possible, and we all followed his example.

Whoever the members of this society were, and whatever their object, they were exceedingly careful of their secret, and seemed to fear that even those solid walls might have ears. The old man read from his papers for some time, but beyond a low murmur I could hear nothing. Many letters were read, too, and passed round for inspection, causing whispered communications.

After a short silence the handsome Russian began to speak, and, waxing hot in his argument, raised his voice considerably higher

than the old man had done. But his words were without meaning to me. He may have been talking Russian, but I think it more likely that he was speaking in some jargon peculiar to the gang, for the others who spoke afterwards used the same tongue.

Thurlow several times whispered to me to try and interpret their conversation, which, of course, I was unable to do, as was also Jim—at least, he said so.

During the whole of this meeting we were constantly obliged to retreat to our former position at the entrance of the passage, as at intervals the man who had stood as sentry marched up with a slow tread to the entrance, and then turned and went back again. The proceeding was an extremely dangerous one, but the floor of the cave was soft and damp, and so we were enabled to perform these manoeuvres without the least noise.

Their precautions against a sudden surprise were complete.

If Jim spoke truly when he said he did not understand the language, it was probably unknown to this man and his companions at the other end of the passage.

This idea was in a way confirmed when I heard Vincent call to him in English, as he came to the end of his beat for about the tenth time.

For some while the discussion had taken a quarrelsome turn, caused by some observation of Vincent's. By their gestures and the intonation of their voices I felt certain that, whatever it was he had proposed, it met with considerable opposition.

It was in the midst of this debate that Vincent called out to the sentry :

"Clarkson !"

"Sir ?" was the respectful answer.

"Tell Laburn and Moore I want them. I think they will prove my words," he added to his companions.

I was about to hear what it was he had proposed. The man departed, and in a minute or so returned with two men. They stood outside the cave for a moment awaiting permission to enter, and I recognised them as two of the men who had been in The Wheatsheaf that night, and who had rejoiced at seeing Jim so brutally treated.

"Come in," said the old man in English.

The sentry went down the passage, and we crept to our position near the entrance again.

"You were in The Wheatsheaf to-night when I thrashed that drunken rascal?" said Vincent in a clear voice.

"Yes, sir."

"And you saw Squire Wade come in and interfere?"

"Yes."

"And he took Jim's part, did he not?"

"Yes, sir."

"I do not see this is sufficient reason for your proposal, Vincent," said the old man.

"One moment," said the Captain. "You followed Jim when he left the inn, did you not?"

"Yes, sir," answered both men.

"And where did he go?"

"Hung about for a time," said one; "but afterwards he started off across the downs towards the Manor House."

"That is, he followed Mr. Wade?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure he went to the Manor House?" asked the Russian.

"No, sir. He gave us the slip."

"Do you see now why I have advised this?" said Vincent.

"This fellow, who has been one of our most valuable servants, has

turned against us. We have as an enemy a man who knows the whole secret of this retreat, and, further, we have him following Mr. Wade, who has the power to ruin our operations in this neighbourhood. This drunkard confessed that he would tell Mr. Wade, and at any moment our meeting may be intruded upon."

There was silence for some minutes, and I felt that our lives were worth only a few moments' purchase if Vincent succeeded in frightening his companions. His argument was forcibly logical, and evidently struck the meeting as being so.

"You are not sure whether Jim actually spoke to Mr. Wade to-night?" said the German at length, turning to the men.

"No, sir. He went in the direction of the Manor House."

"Do you think he actually went there?"

"I don't," said one man. "We must have seen him."

"I think he did," said the other. "He spoke as if he meant it when he told the Captain he would blab."

After this the men were told to retire.

"There is a good deal of supposition about the matter," said one whom I could not see.

"At least the supposition is well founded," Vincent answered. "The secret is in imminent danger, and the danger can only be stopped by death."

"Death!" I said to myself. "Whose death?"

As if to answer my question Vincent continued:

"This drunken Jim is easily disposed of; not so Mr. Wade. He is already aware that there is a secret connected with the Manor House; but instead of being frightened at it, as we fondly hoped, he has for weeks been using all his energies to unravel it. If we wish to keep our secret Mr. Wade must die, and die to-night!"

Death is seldom, if ever, a pleasant subject for contemplation, but when you hear your own murder discussed in this cool manner by

a band of desperadoes who are within ten yards of you, it becomes not only unpleasant but exceedingly ghastly.

"That is one side of the question, Vincent," said the old man, and I blessed him for throwing a stumbling-block in the way. "There is another side. Mr. Wade has many friends, and his disappearance would raise such an outcry, that the Manor House, already a place of ill-omen, would be razed to the ground. This would be most inconvenient."

Vincent did not answer.

"No," continued the man on whose words I felt our lives rested; "I think his death would be the beginning of the end. Mrs. Wade would be as dangerous after her husband's death as he is now."

"Yes; I had not thought much about her," was Vincent's rather sullen reply.

"Is she at the Manor House now?" asked the German, who, like Vincent, seemed to be in favour of my murder.

"I believe so," was the slow answer.

His words were a revelation to me. These men were ignorant of my wife's disappearance then. Was Vincent ignorant of it, too? I would have given much to have been able to see his face, but I could not, and was only able to judge his thoughts by the tone of his voice.

There was a long silence.

The German broke it.

"The danger, however, exists," he said. "We must find some means to overcome it. Has it ever been the custom of this society to allow treachery in its very midst? Where is the man who has broken his oath?"

"With Mr. Wade at the Manor House," said Vincent.

The villain little knew how strange a mixture of truth and fallacy his words were.

"Shall he live?" said the German.

"No," was the unanimous answer.

Jim put his hand on my arm as his death-warrant was thus calmly sealed. He had probably given a silent consent to the death of other victims at some time or other, and knew that the decision of these men was absolutely final. I imagine that he touched Thurlow in the same way, for that individual muttered:

"Remember, one step, and I'll blow your brains out!"

I suppose he thought Jim would rush forward in his terror, and implore for mercy.

At this moment I saw the light of the approaching sentry, and we were obliged to retreat, much to my annoyance, as the knowledge of their plans might be the means of saving my own life, and also of finding Edith's whereabouts.

He approached the cave entrance, but instead of returning immediately, he stood there, and said in a somewhat sing-song tone of voice:

"The tide has turned, and will be below level in twenty minutes."

This was the signal for the meeting to close. Papers were gathered together, and coats and wrappers were put on.

"My proposal has not been negatived or acceded to yet," said Vincent.

The sentry had retired, and we were again close to the entrance.

"I put it to the vote," said the old man.

I watched anxiously.

Two of the men I could see drew their daggers, and I suppose some of those I could not see did the same.

"Seven against, six for," said the chief, first looking round at his companions. "Mr. Wade must live for the present, Vincent."

There was no answer from the villain addressed, and I felt that the old man, who had made no movement against me, had saved my life.

"And the other?" said the German interrogatively. "That one who has been a traitor to his oath?"

A malignant smile played upon the face of the man I had mentally blessed the moment before.

"He is different," he said. "No one will miss him; no one will enquire for him. I, for one, vote for his removal. Are we all agreed?" he said after a pause. "Then he must die. Vincent, you must appoint his executioner."

Again Jim clutched me excitedly, and again Thurlow grimly reminded him of the destination of his revolver's contents if he stirred from his position.

With this the meeting concluded, and we hastily retreated.

Past the sentry, who again stood at the entrance, filed the thirteen conspirators, silently as they had come; and when they had all gone the sentry followed.

The light of the retreating lanterns flickered on the walls for a few seconds, and then we were left in total darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WE stood motionless and silent for some minutes after the conspirators had gone. Then Thurlow whispered to me:

"We have stumbled on some gigantic plot, Mr. Wade. It is lucky that Vincent's advice met with so much opposition, although it was such good counsel. The secret is certainly in very great danger. Let us follow."

"Not now—not now!" said Jim hastily.

"Why not?"

"They have not gone yet. Listen! I can hear the splashing of the oars."

"A sure sign that we are safe in advancing," said Thurlow, who was evidently excited at the success of our night's work. "Keep that lantern dark, Phillips, and be ready, all of you, to use your revolvers if necessary."

In a body we went cautiously down the passage, past the entrance to the meeting-chamber.

Not a word was spoken; but on tiptoe, scarcely daring to breathe, we went, feeling our way along the walls, Thurlow sometimes asking Jim in a whisper if we were all right.

Apparently, it was impossible to miss the way, for having passed the small cave, there were no more niches or holes in the side by which we were guiding ourselves; and, as I afterwards discovered, there were none in the other side either.

Presently we bore round to the left, and we then found ourselves at the top of the passage which led down direct to the sea.

The sound of splashing oars grew fainter. It was evident that the conspirators had gone. Only the light of one lantern remained visible, and, as I rightly conjectured, it was held by the villain to whom I would have entrusted my life until to-night.

"They have gone," said Jim, in a tone which showed that their departure afforded exquisite relief to him. "That is the Captain, there."

"Captain Vincent?"

"Yes."

"Have we passed the entrance to his cottage?" asked Thurlow.

"No. It is nearly at the end of the passage."

"Good. He won't come back here, then."

"I don't know that," said Jim.

"Is he alone in the place now?"

"Yes, most probably."

"Well, then, it doesn't much matter if he does come back."

And I could well imagine the sort of expression on the detective's face, as he made this very significant remark.

Vincent, unconscious of any presence save his own in that vast burrow, the loneliness of which he seemed to like as much as I should have objected to it, presently came slowly up the passage.

I could not see his face, for the lantern was only strong enough to show his figure in dim outline, but there was something in his low and unusually deliberate step which made me think that the night's proceedings had been very different to what he had hoped. Perhaps he thought to have raised up such fear in his comrades' breasts that they would have attacked the Manor House immediately to do away with me. Perhaps he knew all about my wife, and these men had in some way frustrated his plans.

My wife—my little wife! Where was she? Was she in this man's possession alive, or was she lying in some rough-hewn box, like that other—dead? Doubts of my wife's constancy had tormented me for weeks, and in my misery I had often thought that it would be better for her to die than deceive me. It was very easy to think such a thing, until I came face to face with death in the hideous form in which I had found it that night; but now——!

Vincent did not come very far up the passage, but turned and went through an opening.

"That is the entrance to his cottage," said Jim.

"Let us follow him," I said impatiently.

I was determined not to let him escape me now.

"Not yet—not yet," said Jim.

Mr. Thurlow settled the matter.

"Can we possibly miss our way into the cottage?" he asked of Jim.

"No."

"Good. Don't you think two of us are enough for one man, Mr. Wade?"

"Yes," I answered, wondering what proposition he was going to make, but ready for anything except a retreat.

"Shall you and I go on then, and let the others return to the Manor House? The place is not likely to be attacked to-night."

I agreed, and after the detective had given strict injunctions to the policemen not to lose sight of Jim for a moment, they left us.

When they had gone, Thurlow and I advanced cautiously, feeling our way carefully so as to be certain of not missing the opening to the cottage. We dared not turn on the lanterns.

At last Thurlow, who was first, stopped.

"Here it is," he whispered.

We stood for a moment and listened.

There was not a sound except the distant roar of heaving breakers rolling in at the base of the cliff.

Without a word we turned, and after going up a slight incline for some distance, we came to steps similar to those by which we had come down from the Manor House.

These we ascended, hardly daring to breathe, for we had not the slightest notion how far Vincent was in front of us, or, indeed, if he had not turned aside and we had passed him. We had nothing to guide us but the wall, for the darkness was simply black.

Suddenly we stopped. There was a faint glimmer of light above us, and we could see that we were just at the entrance to some chamber. I imagined that the entrance to it was arranged in the same way as the library one, but in this I was mistaken.

We listened.

A door was opened. Someone had entered the room above us.

"Is the meeting over?"

"Yes."

"And you have succeeded?"

"No," was Vincent's sulky answer. "Fools! I showed them the danger, I told them that his death was the only means of safety, and yet they would not see it."

"And Jim?"

"He is voted to death. I am told to appoint his executioner, but it isn't worth the trouble. By the time the secret is known I shall have gone," and he laughed unpleasantly.

I could not recognise the other man by his voice, but he was evidently someone in whom Vincent placed absolute trust, and who seemed as anxious for my death as the Captain was.

"What shall you do then?"

There was a pause, then Vincent answered slowly :

"Let me see. My brain is confused by my failure, but I will succeed in spite of their infernal obstinacy. The tide is high at 9.20 to-morrow night. You'll be able to get across the bar at five minutes to nine, won't you?"

"Yes."

"To-morrow night, then, at high tide I shall leave this place for ever, and I shall not go alone. If persuasion fails, I will use force."

"Not so loud, Captain. Remember——"

Vincent lowered his voice at once.

"Fools! If they had only killed Wade to-night, what a trump-card I should have held? Her husband dead, her fair fame gone, her——"

"Captain," interrupted his companion, "couldn't we make her believe him dead? That other——"

But here the speaker's voice sank so low that I could hear nothing but a mumbling sound. This continued for two or three minutes.

Then Vincent spoke in a louder key :

"Yes ; it can be done. I never thought of that. To-morrow night, then. You will be sure that everything is ready."

"I will."

"Good-night."

The man who had joined Vincent apparently left him, for we heard a door close rather noisily, and we were in darkness again.

My first thought was that my wife was at least safe so far. My second was that the entrance to the cottage was closed, and that we were powerless to help her to-night.

"We had better just see what this place is like," said Thurlow, and suiting the action to the word he flashed the lantern.

He turned it off again in a moment. To our surprise the trap above us was open. We waited.

"Doesn't seem to be anyone there, thank Heaven !" Thurlow said when we had listened for a little while. "They would have seen our light. Shall we go up ?"

I answered by moving forward, and the next moment we stood in the cottage.

The entrance was different to the Manor House one, being only a trap in the floor, which lifted up like the lid of a well. The lid lay beside the opening, and the room was nothing more than a cellar.

It was empty and dark, but a light shone through two or three holes, which were evidently perforated in the top of a door at one end, and I could hear someone talking in the adjoining chamber.

"This is dangerous work," whispered Thurlow ; "but we must get to that door and listen at any cost. Wait a moment."

He turned on the lantern a little to be certain that we should trip over nothing in making our way towards it.

The door was a low one, and I could see perfectly well through the holes.

The room was only a cellar like the one we were in, but it had been fitted up with a certain idea of comfort. There was a table, on which stood a shaded lamp; two or three rugs were thrown down upon the stone floor to take off the bareness of the apartment, and two chairs and a sofa completed the furniture. At the end of the room nearest to us stood Captain Vincent, and a revolver was lying on the table before him. The lantern which he had put out stood near the wall on one side, and he had thrown down his hat and cloak beside it. At the other end of the table, apparently in the deepest abstraction, sat my wife!

CHAPTER XIX.

MY wife! She was sitting with her head resting upon her hands, her eyes fixed upon the table. She took no notice of the man standing opposite to her—probably had taken no notice of him since he had entered—and it was quite evident that she would not commence a conversation.

I cannot say that Edith looked very much the worse for her imprisonment, or for the excitement which she must have gone through, poor girl! but in her pale face, half hidden from me, there was a look of determination and defiance which I had never seen there before. To me she had been always a girl. She was now a strong and determined woman.

"Whatever happens we must not be found here, Mr. Wade," whispered Thurlow. "This man's suspicions must not be aroused, or we shall never lay our hands on the great heads of this curious society."

"All right!" I replied.

It was very good logic from the detective's point of view, I have no doubt; but his end and mine were different. I knew perfectly

well that I should care little for the future of the secret society if circumstances required that I should make my presence known.

As if in answer to my thoughts, Thurlow continued :

"Besides, for your wife's safety we must be quiet. This Vincent is a desperate character, and sooner than give her up to you he would shoot her. You see he has his revolver beside him, and before we could hope to rescue her by forcing this door she would be dead."

He was right. I had never thought of this.

I should think Vincent stood looking at her for fully five minutes after we began to watch him. At last he spoke.

"Mrs. Wade."

My wife made no answer either by word or movement.

"Mrs. Wade," he repeated.

Still she did not answer.

"I have come to you again. Have you nothing to say to one who loves you, and is your abject slave?"

Thurlow put his hand on my arm as these words were uttered, as a warning to me not to move or speak. So anxious was he, that I believe he would have threatened me by putting a revolver to my head, as he had done to Jim, if he had thought it necessary.

I took the gentler hint, however, and remained quiet.

Edith now looked up from her book into the face of the villain beside her.

"I have nothing to say except what I have said before."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"What is there against me, Mrs. Wade?"

"A strange question from your lips," said Edith, still looking at him, and she seemed a great deal more at her ease than he did. "For a man who has kidnapped another man's wife, and ordered the brutal murder of her friend, to ask such a question is absurd."

"I have told you that Mr. Gaythorne is not dead," Vincent returned.

"You have told me so," said Edith quietly; "and I have told you that I do not believe you."

"Mrs. Wade," Vincent said, after a short pause, "I have come to you to-night to explain my conduct, and to ask your advice. Will you give me leave to speak?"

"Unfortunately I have no power to stop you."

"Your husband once asked me why I lived at Leak; you could now probably answer the question. I will not attempt to conceal the facts from you. I am a member—an important member—of a secret society, which holds its meetings in the caves below and between this house and your own; and it was my duty to watch you and your husband when you first came to live here. Indeed, I did my best to prevent your coming. I told your husband that the place was haunted, I bid a much higher price for the property than he had arranged to give, but I failed to accomplish my end, and you came. This ought to explain a great deal of my conduct."

She did not make any answer.

"Mr. Wade trusted me; you did not; and therefore I had a great deal more to fear from you than from him, especially as you had a man to help you who always fancied evil of me."

"Fancied evil!" replied Edith scornfully.

"I said so. Your conduct made your husband suspicious, and I helped that suspicion to the uttermost."

"I know that. You need not tell me the part you have played."

"But in that I deceived your husband. I never for a single moment imagined that you were too fond of Mr. Gaythorne. I had another object in view, Mrs. Wade. Can you not guess it?"

"No. I suppose the sacrifice of my happiness—perhaps also of my life—is necessary to this mystery in some unaccountable way. I

can think of no other reason. Why am I here? Indeed, where am I? I do not know."

"You are in my cottage, Mrs. Wade."

"For what purpose?"

"That is what I have come here to tell you to-night," he answered slowly. "As I have said, the caves underneath us are the secret meeting-place of a great society. The mystery of the Manor House is not an ordinary trick to frighten people. It is to keep secluded the headquarters of a vast society which will one day overturn this country and many others. See what terrible confidence I am placing in you."

"Isn't it rather dangerous to trust me?"

"I think not," and for the first time a little maliciousness betrayed itself in his voice. "I am not the head of this society. I am only a servant, bound to do what I am told; often forced to do that which I absolutely detest."

He waited for her to make some remark; but she did not speak.

"To this brotherhood I am bound by all the most solemn vows. I am bound with my life to fulfil its bidding; to do my utmost to forward its object; to consider its friends my friends; its enemies my enemies. To neglect any portion of my vow is to be voted to death by the members, and, as surely as anyone in the past has been condemned, that man has been hunted down by the unrelenting hand of the brotherhood. Do you understand?"

She bowed slightly.

"Until now I have acquiesced in all these things. Now, Mrs. Wade, I want to act differently."

"That is easy, I presume," said Edith.

"Yes, with your consent."

"My consent!"

"Yes. I love you, and for your sake I will give up all that I value most—all that I have lived for until now."

Before she could make any answer he caught her hands.

"Hear me ! I am a man, not a boy with his foolish love and fancy ; I am a man who loves you with all the passion in his nature, and one whom you have often stung to madness by the slights you have given him."

"A man has honour, sir ; where is yours ?"

"What can honour matter when love is so deep, so tender ?" was Vincent's answer.

"You talk, sir, as you think. You have trained your life by such a low standard that all which is most noble in man is foreign to you I can understand no love without honour."

Captain Vincent was baffled, and did not seem to know how to resume.

"You are cruel—terribly cruel," he said. "I——"

"You have said enough," interrupted my wife. "Whether you have ever felt a particle of real love for me or not, I do not know, nor do I care. I do not think you have, or your love would have forbidden you acting as you have done."

"What else could I do ?"

"There is no answer to such a question. I am married."

"I know ; but can the Manor House ever be your home again ?" he asked passionately. "Do you not know that your husband has suspected you for a long time ? Do you not know that he has let everyone know this by his actions ? Do you not know that his suspicion is now confirmed ; that everyone knows of your elopement with Gerald Gaythorne ; that your husband has openly denounced you ? He would spurn you with his foot if you approached him again. You are homeless, friendless. Do you not know all this ?"

"I do not ; but whatever my husband has been led to believe is due to your influence, and, even were all you say true, I would sooner die than even touch you willingly."

"I deny that. His own brain has conjured up his jealousy."

I felt Thurlow's hand grasp my arm in the darkness, to warn me not to make any movement.

"By his own actions you are free," continued Vincent. "Will you not let me plead my love? I am ready to protect you—to love you as you have never yet been loved. Come to me; and for your sake I will give up all. I——"

"Silence!"

Edith's passionate command made the wretch before her obey.

"Will you let me leave this place?" she demanded, without a quiver of her white lips.

"To come with me—yes."

"To go with my husband?"

"No."

"Then I remain here, even if it is to await my death. Leave me!"

I doubt whether a man, in the presence and power of his most deadly enemy, has ever quite so much courage as a woman in the same predicament. There is something so sublime in a brave woman's defiance, that the greatest villain is almost always impressed and silenced by it.

"You have repaid me ill, Mrs. Wade. Only to-night I tried to do you a service. I am sorry I troubled myself about it."

The man's manner changed. He had failed to obtain any encouragement of his infamous proposal, and it was at once apparent that he was about to try her in another way. He waited for her to speak.

"I am sorry, too," she said.

"My good endeavour failed, however," he continued slowly. "As an enemy to the secret society, your husband was to-night voted to death by the society. I cast my vote to save him."

Edith started violently, and her pale face lost its expression of scorn in a moment, and she was the loving woman and anxious wife

again. It was the first time that she had given way to her own fears during the whole of that interview, and, with outstretched arms and clasped hands, she sprang towards the man who had lied to her.

"Oh, you will save him—you will save him !"

The wretch's subtlety had given him the upper hand, but only for a moment. He held out his arms to her, but suddenly she stopped.

"I forgot. I will ask nothing of you. Anything is better than that."

"Not even to save your husband's life ?"

She did not answer.

"Not even to save the life of the man who has forsaken you ; who has published your unfaithfulness to the world ?"

"Villain !"

There was unutterable scorn in Edith's voice, but Vincent, intent on using his last and most desperate weapon, took no notice of it.

"I said that my good endeavour failed," he said. "I was sorry then ; now I see that it was all for the best. I did all in my power to save your husband's life, but others were stronger than I."

Edith looked at him and waited, but did not speak.

There was a long pause. Then Vincent said, slowly and quietly:
"He is dead."

I should have sprung forward to deny it had not Thurlow stopped me. With a strength almost superhuman, he seized me by the throat, absolutely preventing me from uttering a sound, and hurried me backwards to the secret entrance. Before I had time to make any resistance I found myself at the foot of the stairs which led into Vincent's cottage.

Looking calmly at his action now, I believe he rendered me a great service, and probably saved Edith's life ; but I did not think so then,

CHAPTER XX.

"FOOL! What are you doing?" were the first words I said.

"We are safe until to-morrow night," answered Thurlow.

"You would have spoilt everything if I had not forcibly prevented you."

I was furious.

"Let me go. She may be murdered before I can get back to her."

"You are not going back, Mr. Wade."

I did not answer, but with all my strength took him by the shoulders to throw him out of my path. For a few moments we struggled violently, but I could not master him. He held his position, and I could not pass him.

"Listen to me, Mr. Wade," he said, pushing me backwards. "Your wife is perfectly safe until to-morrow night. Do you think I would stop you if there was danger?"

"You argue only from your own point. My wife's safety is all I care for, and I will go to her."

"If you attempt to pass me I'll settle the question by laming you to prevent it. I have my revolver in my hand. Hear reason, or take the consequences."

He spoke with determination, and I knew he would do it if I made the attempt.

"Come, Mr. Wade, be reasonable. Your wife is perfectly safe. To-morrow night this blackguard will attempt to run away with her. We have heard from his own lips how he intends to do it; and to-morrow night we shall take him."

I was silent. As far as Thurlow's object went I have no doubt his plan was a very admirable one, but to me it was not so promising. Now that I had found my wife—and alive, thank Heaven!—my whole anxiety was to release her; and, much as I desired to see

Vincent punished, I did not so much care if he escaped so long as I had Edith in my arms again.

"Could we not at least let her know that we are going to help her?" I said.

"We might," said Thurlow, after a pause. "Yes, it would be a good idea. It might make our work to-morrow night easier."

I was delighted to find him at one with me in this.

"We will watch until Vincent leaves her," I continued excitedly; "and then tell her."

"You promise that you will not attempt to take her away to-night?"

"Yes."

"Good! Wait, we must not talk to her; someone might hear us. Write a line on a piece of paper, and put it under the door. We can just call her attention to it, and come away."

I took an envelope from my pocket, tore it open, and by the light of the lantern wrote in pencil:

"To-morrow night Vincent will attempt to run away with you. I have discovered his plot, and will save you. Believe nothing he says, but let him think that you are not so unwilling to go with him.
—Your loving husband, EDWARD."

I folded it up, and in silence we ascended the stairs again.

"Carefully," said Thurlow in a whisper. "Listen!"

Not a sound.

"We ought to be at the top," he said, and he turned on the lantern a little.

We were at the top, but the trap was closed. I tried to push it up, but in vain. There was nothing left but to wait for to-morrow night.

I tore the note up, put the fragments in my pocket, and went down again, followed by the detective,

"I am sorry, Mr. Wade," he said, when we had reached the bottom, "but it will be all right. I think all has been done for the best. Just think now. This Vincent is a most determined ruffian, and if you had broken in upon him he might have shot your wife to defeat you. Believe me, she is quite safe now. Vincent has made his final arrangements, and he will not alter them."

"He might," I answered. "Supposing he found out that the secret was discovered last night, and should carry out his plot during the day."

"Most improbable."

"But yet possible," I continued. "It is quite evident that his connection with the society is a secondary consideration now, and that his one idea is to get away with my wife."

"Yes ; it seems so."

"Do you not see the danger?" I urged. "It may be a small one ; but put yourself in my place, and then see how even a small danger becomes a very real one."

He put his hand on my arm. It was the first sympathetic action I had found him guilty of.

"I understand, Mr. Wade," he said. "In the excitement of my own aims I had almost forgotten the terrible ordeal you have of necessity gone through. We will be cautious. Vincent may have more accomplices than the men we have heard of to-night; so I think we will send to Axminster, and get two or three more policemen. It is best to be on the safe side. And, to ensure complete success, we will put one of the men in the wood over against Vincent's cottage to keep watch all day. Will that be more satisfactory to you?"

There was nothing else to be done, so I acquiesced.

The grey dawn was creeping over the sea when we retraced our steps up the passage, and through the central cavern.

"One moment," said Thurlow, stopping suddenly. "It will be as well to leave this as it was."

He went to the box which contained poor Gaythorne's remains, and carefully replaced the planks which he had knocked down.

"I think that removes every trace of our visit. Let us go."

The apertures in the top of the cave were dimly discernible now, and without much difficulty we found our way back to the Manor House stairs.

The policemen and Jim were in the library, all looking very sleepy; in fact, I am not certain that our entrance did not wake some of them.

Thurlow immediately dispatched one of the men to watch the cottage, with strict orders to report if anything curious should happen there. The going and coming of men he was to take no notice of, but he was not to let a lady leave the cottage without letting us know at once, and he was also to keep a sharp look-out seaward to see if any boat approached the base of the cliff. Above all, he was not to let anyone see him.

Thurlow said he would start for Axminster at once if I would lend him a horse, which I did, of course.

"I shall get the men here quite early then, and with less chance of being noticed."

Jim was left in charge of one of the policemen, who had strict orders not to lose sight of him. Thurlow evidently still distrusted the man.

CHAPTER XXI.

SOON after ten o'clock Thurlow returned, and between that hour and twelve three more policemen entered the house at different times, so as not to attract attention by coming in a body.

In the afternoon I walked across to the village just to show myself. I did not see the necessity of doing so, but Thurlow suggested it, as it might prove to people who were suspicious that I knew nothing of last night's proceedings. Whether it had any such effect I cannot say, but it certainly did me good. I felt in better spirits after it, my hopes seemed to shine with a more distinct reality, and my nerves resumed their normal condition to a great extent.

Later in the afternoon I went to my dressing-room, and spent fully two hours in looking through and arranging some papers; and then—I don't know whether it was my melancholy mood which prompted it or not—I wrote a long letter to my wife.

It was possible that I should never see her again. What was more probable than that some shot or blow would take her life or mine. So I wrote to Edith, telling her all that I had suffered since her disappearance, and begging over and over again to be forgiven anything I had ever said or done to give her pain. I confessed how my folly had made me suspect her, and I told her how I loved her in terms more passionate than any I had ever used before either in words or writing. This letter I sealed, and put on the toilet-table in her bedroom. She might never see it, but still, if she came back without me, she would know what were my last feelings towards her.

It was six o'clock when I went down to the library. Mr. Thurlow was in the room with four of the policemen. They rose as I entered.

"Mr. Wade," said the detective, by way of introduction, and perhaps to show that I had a right to enter, and to ensure my not being fired upon, for all the men were looking at their revolvers to see that they were in trim for the night's work.

"Six o'clock," said Thurlow, putting his revolver in the breast-pocket of his coat. "It will be high-tide at fifteen minutes past nine. I think we might be on the move very soon. It is better to be too early than too late."

"Nothing has been heard from the man who is watching the cottage, I suppose !" I said.

"Nothing," answered the detective. "Where's that other fellow and Jim?"

His question called my attention to the fact that they were not in the room. Thurlow went into the hall, and I followed him.

"Stevens! Stevens!" he called in a loud and angry voice. "Confound the fellow! I told him to be here at six o'clock. Stevens! Where is the fellow?"

I opened the front door to look down the drive. There was not a sign of them anywhere, and we returned to the library.

"I give them five minutes," said Thurlow, taking out his watch and putting it on the table beside him. "If they don't come, we will go without them. We are six resolute men, well armed. We are enough."

His men nodded approvingly.

"One last word," said Thurlow, addressing us all. "I want nothing done rashly; and until the lady is safe with us, I would rather no shot were fired. But this, of course, must depend upon circumstances. Above all, rather take the men alive than kill them. Dead, they can give no evidence; living——"

He was interrupted by the hasty entrance of Stevens.

"Where the——" began Thurlow.

"He's gone!" said Stevens.

"Jim gone!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, sir. He's been very excited most of the day, and about an hour ago we went down to the stables, and he began to smoke in one of the coach-houses. After a while he just went outside the door, to look what sort of a night it was going to be. I followed him almost immediately; but he had gone. I have searched everywhere for him, but I cannot find him. I am very sorry."

"I shall report you," Thurlow said shortly, replacing his watch and buttoning up his coat.

My thoughts were set in rapid and unpleasant action at once. What if this Jim had proved traitor, as was only too probable, and, after discovering our plans, had gone to inform against us ! Bitterly did I curse Stevens for his carelessness. Here, at the end, we were going to be frustrated—perhaps, even now, Edith was gone. Yet the policeman on the watch had not reported anything. But then, he might be careless, too. My hopes rose one moment, and fell the next. I became desperate.

"Are we ready ?" said the detective.

The men buttoned up their coats, and answered in the affirmative.

Thurlow went to the door, locked it, and put the key in his pocket. He also saw that the windows were securely fastened and shuttered.

"Should anyone try to escape this way, he will find himself in a trap."

The men smiled at the detective's cunning. I suppose it was to their advantage to approve of all their chief did. To me the precaution seemed rather absurd, for surely if anyone fled in that direction, it would be ourselves, and we should fall into our own trap. I said as much.

"We don't want to escape," he answered sharply.

"You forget the changed circumstances," I went on. "Our intentions are probably as well known to them as to us by this time."

"Well ?"

"Well."

Thurlow smiled his peculiar smile.

"We are six resolute men, and well armed," he said, "We are enough."

I looked round ; we were seven, with Stevens.

Thurlow noticed my look.

“ Ah, we are six resolute men—we are seven, well armed. We are enough.”

Stevens looked very ashamed and confused. His character was evidently gone in the eyes of the man of Scotland Yard.

Then, at Thurlow's request, I pressed the scroll and pushed back the support of the mantelpiece. Without the slightest sound the great hearthstone was depressed and slid backwards.

To make escape more hopeless, Thurlow turned out the lamps which had been burning in the library, and we were in darkness, except for the bull's-eyes which three of the men carried.

We all descended—Thurlow first, Stevens and I bringing up the rear.

“ Replace the stone, Mr. Wade,” said Thurlow from below.

I hesitated for a moment, but obeyed. The stone closed over my head, and I wondered if I should live to enter the Manor House again.

CHAPTER XXII.

WITHOUT a word, and not daring to flash the lanterns, we crept down the stairs, and felt our way along the walls of the inclined passage, until we came to the entrance to the main cave. This we crossed silently, and as quickly as possible.

Suddenly the detective stopped us.

“ Listen ! ”

We listened intently.

Not a sound, except the dull booming of the breakers, and that sound was only very faint. It was certain that the tide was nowhere near high-water mark yet,

"Flash the light a moment!"

One of the men turned on his bull's-eye.

I was somewhat surprised to find that we were standing in almost the exact place where Jim had stopped us on the previous evening. I found out afterwards that Thurlow had counted his paces on that occasion.

"One moment with that light!" he said in a whisper.

He took it and turned the ray upon the niche where Gaythorne's makeshift coffin had been on the previous night.

It was gone!

My horror at this discovery was hardly less than when we had first seen the hideous thing. Jim had informed against us. We were too late.

"We have chosen our time well," whispered Thurlow in a satisfied tone of voice, and darkening the lantern as he spoke. "A few moments earlier, and the flash of our light might have been seen."

There was common-sense in this argument.

"I wonder what they have moved it for," he continued.

"Jim has probably told them everything," I said.

"That would be a reason for their letting it remain where it was," he answered quickly. "Its absence would only tend to arouse our suspicion."

"You think they have gone, then?"

"They can't go until the tide is high."

After this whispered conversation we went forward again, and, having found the entrance to the sea-passage without much difficulty, we crept slowly along the walls, taking great care to keep together.

As we came to the bend in the passage, from which point it led straight down to the sea, we saw a faint glimmer of light before us, and it was evident we were not the first actors in that night's drama to appear upon the scene.

A man stood against the wall at the sea-end of the passage. By the dim light of the horn-lantern on the ground beside him, I could see the outline of his figure and the dark outline of things near him, but I could not see his features to recognise him.

At his feet was the long box which had contained the remains of poor Gaythorne. Whether they had been removed from their resting-place or not, we had no means of telling.

The man was apparently a stranger to me. As far as I could see he was dressed as a sailor, but for two reasons I did not think he was one. First, he was smoking a cigarette; and secondly, a sailor would probably be too superstitious to stand alone beside a dead body. At another time I might not have noticed this, but waiting there in the darkness, anxious to be doing something, and with my nerves strung to the highest pitch of excitement, I speculated on these little details.

For some time he stood leaning against the side of the cavern without changing his position, or even raising his hand to take the cigarette from his lips.

Presently he became restless, and changed his position constantly, and I noticed that after a time he moved a little higher up the passage, as if to be farther away from the dead man who was his grim companion. This new resting-place did not suit him long, however, and he began to pace up and down, coming about ten yards towards us, and then retreating.

At last his restlessness increased, and he began to mutter to himself and stamp impatiently.

After pacing up and down for nearly half an hour, he went to the sea-entrance, and lay down at full length upon the floor, evidently to listen to the sounds which travelled over the water.

He appeared to hear nothing, for he got up, took up the lantern, and came storming up the passage again.

He stopped at the entrance to the steps which led up to the cottage. I could see the recess as he lifted the lantern above his head to throw a light into the darkness.

I saw something else at the same time.

The man we were watching was Vincent himself.

"Curse the fools!" he said, loud enough for us to hear. "They will be late!"

He walked impatiently back to the entrance, and listened again, in the same way as before. This time he sprang to his feet almost immediately. His suspense was at an end. The real work of the night was about to commence.

I strained my ears to catch the faintest sound, anxious to ascertain how many we were likely to have against us.

I heard the faint splashing of oars, and then a low, clear whistle. It was answered by Vincent, and the next moment it was certain that the boat was at the entrance, for I heard the rattle of the oars in the rowlocks as they were shipped.

"Surely the tide can't serve yet!" whispered Thurlow in my ear.

I did not answer.

"Why are you late?" said Vincent angrily.

"We're not," was the surly reply from the water. "Ten minutes ago we couldn't have got over the bar."

"I thought so," said Thurlow.

Vincent threw out a rope, the end of which was fixed inside the cave, and by its help a man hoisted himself in.

He was dressed like Vincent, but I should not have recognised him had not the Captain called him by his name.

"A quarter to nine, Redfern. We have plenty of time."

"Will she come with you?" asked Redfern.

"Yes."

"Willingly?"

"No."

"Your plans, then?"

There was no need to strain our ears to catch what they said. They spoke loud enough for us to hear perfectly.

"Use force, if necessary—and this," and Vincent showed something to the landlord of The Wheatsheaf. "But I must in some way show her Wade's body, or rather, the one that is to do duty for it."

"Do you think it will deceive her?" said Redfern doubtfully.

"Yes; she will be nervous—perhaps half unconscious. The face is not very distinctly visible through the cracks in these boards, and the very ghastliness of the sight will do the rest. She will probably faint, and that will simplify matters."

"Is it loaded?"

"Yes; it will sink like a stone."

Apparently the answers settled all Redfern's doubts.

He took up the lantern, and followed Vincent to the opening which led up to the cottage. The reflection of the lantern quivered for a moment on the opposite wall of the cave, and then we were in darkness.

"Quick!" said Thurlow, "we must find out how many are in the boat."

Saying something which I did not hear to four of the men, who moved away from us at once, he took my arm, and, together with one of the policemen, we went towards the sea-entrance, being careful to avoid the box which lay in the centre of the passage. Creeping cautiously to the entrance we looked down.

And here, perhaps, I may shortly describe this entrance. It was situated at high-water mark in the cliff, and was doubly secure, being screened from the open sea by an apparently impassable barrier of

rock, which enclosed the waters round it in a large basin, and being at a corner of the cliff, it might easily have escaped notice, even by anyone in a boat in the basin itself.

It will be remembered that Vincent and I had taken a boat round to the base of the cliff soon after the first fright at the Manor House, and, of course, had discovered nothing ; but I must confess that, knowing as I now do the manner of entering this basin, that this is not to be wondered at.

When the tide is about three-quarters flood, there is a zigzag entrance through the rocky barrier, into which the incoming tide pours so fiercely that to the uninitiated it would pass for one of the great holes with which these massive cliffs abound. But it is passable, and forms the only entrance to the secret cave. At high tide the sea closes up this entrance, and the water in the basin rises to the mouth of the cave, but does not cover the rocky barrier which conceals it. Of course at low water the entrance is many feet above one's head.

Nothing of the open sea could be seen from the mouth of the cave, and as the tide had some time yet before the full, the water in the basin was some feet below us. Lying fastened by the rope which Vincent had thrown down was a stout, sea-going dingey, and one man sat in the stern smoking.

Having found out the strength of our enemy, we went back.

"Mr. Wade."

Thurlow's voice startled me in the darkness. We were standing so near to that terrible coffin, and I was greatly excited.

"I fancy our work is easy. That man there," and the detective pointed in the direction of the boat—"that man there will hardly leave his position until he is called for. It is necessary that the boat be kept ready to receive your wife. She will be brought down as soon as the tide is full, shown the contents of this box for a moment,

and hurried away by Vincent. Redfern will immediately drag this box to the entrance, and let it fall over when it has served its ghastly purpose."

I shuddered as he spoke.

"The best point at which to stop these proceedings is at the cottage-entrance. Listen to me now. Vincent will want to see his way down those steps, and, as he will probably have to carry your wife, Redfern will come first carrying the lantern. As soon as he is fairly in the cavern he must be seized, and as Vincent follows him he must be seized from behind, and your wife secured."

"Yes," I said.

"Your wife will probably be half unconscious, and must be taken back to the Manor at once."

"It seems easy to manage."

"Quite. Of course some unforeseen circumstance may happen ; we must trust to time for that. Will you let me place you where I like?"

I answered in the affirmative.

"Come, then."

We went to the entrance of the cottage-passage. Our four men were there, two on either side of the entrance. Two of them were sent to be ready for the man at the sea-entrance. The other two and Stevens were placed on the other side of the passage, not quite opposite to the cottage-entrance, as the light would at once reveal their figures, but near enough to pounce upon Redfern as soon as he stepped into the cave. Two of them were to perform this duty, and the other was to protect my wife. Thurlow, having given his orders, took up his position on one side of the entrance, and I stood on the other. So we waited.

I cannot say how long we waited. It seemed hours, but it could

not have been more than half an hour. Louder and louder sounded the wash of the rising tide.

Suddenly a faint "Hush!" from Thurlow concentrated all my thoughts in a moment.

The dull light of a lantern flickered on the opposite wall. With stealthy footsteps they were coming. There was not another sound save the noisy wash of the waves, which proclaimed the full tide, and the beating of my heart, which seemed to me so loud that I feared it might betray us.

As Thurlow had anticipated, Redfern came first, walking backwards and holding the lantern above his head to show Vincent the way. He stepped into the cave about three yards from the entrance, and saw us. Quick as thought he dropped the lantern, trod on it savagely, and we were in darkness.

"Shoot her, captain! We are caught!" he shouted; and gave a sharp whistle to call the man from the boat.

In the darkness I heard a struggle. I knew that the policemen had attacked him.

Thurlow and I were not idle. By the time Redfern had called out, Vincent had stepped into the passage, carrying Edith in his arms; and as he did so the detective and I seized him.

He struggled violently. A shot rang out in the darkness, and I felt that his arms were free. Whether that bullet had found its resting-place in my wife's bosom or not, I dared not even think. My whole energy was centred on the man I was struggling with. For a moment I was struggling with him alone, my one object being to prevent him using his revolver.

Shots were now exchanged freely, and the flash of the lanterns dazzled me. I am not a weak man, but I felt that Vincent was overpowering me. He got his arm free and fired, and the next moment he had broken from me, and I stood dazed.

Then a bull's-eye flashed out, and I saw Thurlow and a policeman standing beside me.

"My wife?" I said.

"She is safe, sir. I saw her in one of the men's arms," said the policeman.

Thurlow made no answer, but flashed his lantern down towards the sea-entrance. It fell upon three men, one lying apparently dead, the other two wrestling fiercely for the mastery. The man who had been in the boat fought determinedly for his life. He had settled one of his enemies, and as we looked the other fell heavily to the ground. Then the victor made for the boat, confident that further fighting would be useless.

"Stop!" shouted Thurlow.

For answer, the man turned and fired at the light, which the detective had evidently had the precaution to hold to one side of him. The shot did its duty. The light fell to the ground, and in that instant Thurlow fired. One low groan echoed up the cavern, and I saw against the dim light of the entrance that the figure fell, and a heavy splash told us that he had gone to his last resting-place.

It has taken time to write all this, but it was the work of half a minute at the outside. That space of time could not have elapsed between the moment Vincent freed himself from me and that when Thurlow, one of the policemen, and I were chasing him through the passage towards the Manor House.

By the light of the policeman's lantern, always held to one side to give a false mark to aim at, we followed him.

"He is trapped!" muttered Thurlow, and as he spoke Vincent fired at us.

It checked us for a moment, but only for a moment.

"Stop!" shouted the detective.

Another shot came whizzing dangerously close to me. Thurlow

fired at him, but without effect ; and then, to our astonishment, and I must confess my great relief, Vincent changed his course, and instead of going towards the library entrance, made for one of the many dark holes in the side of the cave.

The detective saw a danger at once. Some way of escape known only to the villain himself was to baffle us at the last moment.

"Fire !" he cried, and three pistol-shots rang out as one.

We followed him, feeling that our lives were worth only a minute's purchase. Into that narrow passage how could we hope to go, if he turned at bay and resolutely fired on us ?

He did not, however. Probably his revolver was empty ; and up the narrow passage Thurlow and I followed him. I do not think the policeman did.

Suddenly I stopped, steadying myself against the wall to prevent Thurlow from pushing me forward.

The passage had come to an abrupt termination. I was standing on a narrow platform as it were, or perhaps I may be better understood if I say I was standing in a large niche. There was just enough glimmer of light to show me that there was nothing below me, nothing on either side of me, and nothing above me.

"What is it ? Where is he ?" exclaimed Thurlow, endeavouring, as I imagined he would, to push me forward.

"I don't know," I answered.

Where Vincent could possibly have hidden himself I was at a loss to understand. I could swear that there was no other escape out of that passage, for my hands had felt both walls the whole way along.

Only one way could he have escaped us. He must have stooped down by the side of the wall, and let us pass by him, and by this time he would have returned to the Manor House entrance.

"We have missed him," I said, seized with the fear that he would

discover Edith in his retreat, and blaming myself not a little for having followed him instead of going at once to her. "Come back quickly."

"Not so fast—not so fast!" said Thurlow. "What is this place?"

He took hold of the wall to steady himself, and leant over the platform to look down and up.

"There he is!" he said, and the next moment he fired upwards.

Of all the weird sounds I have heard, I think the report that followed was the worst. It echoed first this side, then that, above us, below us, until it gradually died away in a hollow moan.

"Missed! Curse it! My revolver is empty; give me yours."

I gave it to him, but mine was empty too.

Thurlow's rage knew no bounds. The precise, cool-headed man had become simply frantic.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Can't you see? The well."

It was true. The passage opened into the well about forty or fifty feet from the top, and I now saw why the detective had fired upwards. Slowly scaling the side of the well, by means of small steps and holdings constructed in it, was Vincent. He would escape, for no one unacquainted with every stone in the well could hope to follow him up that perilous ascent.

Above us we could just see the opening, looking very small, as it will be remembered that the boards projected over it for about a foot all round, and within a few feet of the top was the dark form of the man we had been pursuing.

A few moments more, and he had taken hold of the boards to draw himself out of the well.

"Good-night, Wade," he called out. "I shall be even with you yet."

"Never."

A new voice had answered him, and over the opening another form was bending.

"At last, Captain," said the voice again. "I've waited so long!"

"Jim," said Thurlow in a whisper.

The man I had thought would betray us had blocked Vincent's last means of escape.

In the uncertain light it was difficult to see the struggle.

Vincent, holding on with one hand, endeavoured with the other to jerk his enemy down into the well, and partially succeeded, for Jim fell forwards; but it was only to twine his arms securely round the Captain's body, and, hanging by both hands, Vincent had to support himself and the weight of the man who was hanging round him. The struggle could not last long, for Jim would not let his adversary get any foothold. Had Jim been anxious to save his own life I believe Vincent would have got away. He was the stronger man, and his nerves were, of course, firmer and more capable of fitting themselves to the terrible situation. But for himself Jim seemed to care little. All his aim was to drag his victim down with him, and every time Vincent tried to hang by one hand, and beat Jim off with the other, Jim struggled and kicked, forcing the Captain to resume his hold. It was a terrible sight.

The struggle could not last much longer.

"Let me go!" roared Vincent.

"Never, never! Not if you could give me back my wife, my character, all that you have robbed me of."

"You'll fall yourself, idiot! Be sensible. Let us help each other up."

"Never. I shall fall with you."

"Fool! Devil!" and Vincent redoubled his efforts to free himself.

In vain. Jim kicked and struggled more violently, laughing madly the whole time.

Suddenly, there was a cry—one long, awful cry, which rang out and echoed over and over again down the well, and then a black mass fell past us, down, down, down, until a heavy, dull splash sounded hollow and distant. I looked up.

There was nothing now against the dim light of the opening. Together they had fallen, and before the echoing cry had died away, the waters of the well had closed over them for ever.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WE turned away horror-stricken, and rapidly retraced our steps.

When we arrived at the cottage steps again we found Redfern, securely handcuffed, standing sullenly against the wall, beside two policemen. One of them looked white and ill; and I found that he had been stunned by the man from the boat, when the latter had endeavoured to make his escape. The other poor fellow who had joined in that desperate struggle was dead.

Then my wife had been saved by Stevens.

"You came too soon, Squire," said Redfern insolently.

I made no answer.

"You'd better put your wife's body along with the other in the box. The same stones will sink them both."

I shuddered at the suggestion. Was Stevens to be trusted?

As if to answer my question, the man who had been with us when we followed Vincent, came hurriedly up the passage.

"I've been to the Manor House, sir, and can see nothing of Stevens or Mrs. Wade."

"She's dead, you fool!" laughed Redfern. "You didn't expect to have it all your own way, did you?"

A terrible fear came over me, and seizing Thurlow's lantern, I began to look along the passage for any trace of her. How I blamed myself for not having gone to her before.

We searched in every possible corner. We went up into the cottage to see if she had flown back there for safety, but she had not done so; nor could we find any trace of her in the sea-passage, or in the central cave. And whenever we passed Redfern, he taunted me with my failures.

"You've caught us, Squire, but you've lost your wife. A fair division, I say—eh, Squire?"

I thought my worst fears were going to be realised, when we remembered the meeting-cave.

There we found her. She was quite insensible, and was lying prone upon Stevens's body.

Poor fellow ! He was not dead ; but his life had run down to its last two or three short hours, and it was only too evident how he had met his fate. He had rushed forward to save my wife, and had received the bullet from Vincent's revolver which was intended for her. The wound had left him with just enough sense to know that he must get her to a place of safety. He had done so, and then fallen down under the weight of his senseless burden.

I took Edith in my arms, and, relieved of her weight, Stevens opened his eyes.

He was taken to the Manor House at once, and I followed, carrying Edith, hardly feeling at all frightened by her long faint, in the joyful knowledge that she was alive.

Redfern was also removed to the Manor House for that night, and taken to Axminster next morning, to be charged, in due course with being an accomplice in the murder of Gerald Gaythorne. He was the only survivor of the three who had entered the cave that night to carry off my wife, and on his evidence depended all that

we could hope to discover about the secret society. But I must speak of that presently.

To return. Edith was put to bed, and I sent for the doctor immediately, who arrived as soon as possible, and I saw at once that he thought very seriously of her case. I told him shortly that she had gone through two days of the most terrible strain and excitement, and he shook his head as he looked at her, and then, when we had left the room, he told me that if her unconsciousness should turn to a deep sleep, she would probably recover ; but if it did not, if it turned to fever and restlessness, it would most likely kill her, or, if not that, worse—she would wake up mad.

Thank Heaven ! her unconsciousness turned to a deep sleep ! I never knew how I could pray until that night. I never knew how I could thank the Answerer of Prayer until then.

Having seen my wife, the doctor went to Stevens, and presently they came and told me that I was wanted there.

I went. Directly I entered the room I saw that only a very few moments remained to him in this life. He was breathing heavily and unevenly, but he knew me when I approached his side.

"He wants to say something to you," said Thurlow in a low voice.

I bent down over the dying man, and put my hand gently on his arm.

"Is—she—safe ?" he gasped.

"Yes ; you have saved her life," I said, the tears coming to my eyes. "Thank you."

He smiled faintly, and turned his eyes to Thurlow.

"I—did—my best, sir !" gasped the man.

Even in dying, the memory of the detective's words came back to the poor fellow.

"You—won't—report me ?" he said faintly.

"No, I will not," answered Thurlow hoarsely. "You have done bravely and well."

The man was happy ; and with a long, last sigh, he died.

He had gone to report himself to another tribunal. May the just Judge of all men also pronounce the verdict : "Well done, good and faithful servant !"

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOR days and weeks my wife lay between life and death. I had the best advice and the best nursing London could give, but for a time all my care seemed in vain ; and this was all the harder to bear because I was not allowed to see her. On this point all the doctors were agreed. The sight of me would recall everything, and if, in her present state, she were in imagination to live that time over again, the chances were that her brain would be permanently affected.

Fortunately for me, however, I had no time to sit down and brood over my trouble in solitude.

Poor Stevens's funeral was the first thing that demanded my attention, and I shall never forget how the melancholy sight was rendered doubly sad to me when I reflected how soon those solemn words might be spoken over another grave—over the silent form of one dearer to me than my own life. Poor Stevens ! He will always have a tender place in my memory, for his death was the price of Edith's life.

Then there was the coming of great police authorities from London, the careful inspection of the secret passages, and the opening of the many cases stowed away in them. These proved little. That smuggling had taken place to a great extent was evident, and several fishermen in the village were arrested on suspicion, but the search threw no light on the main object of the society.

The discovery of these subterranean caves and the secret entrance to the library did one thing. It raised again the question of old Morsland's death. For years it had remained a mystery, but now a light, and by no means a feeble one, was thrown upon it.

The next thing which occurred was the inquest on poor Gerald Gaythorne's body, and this was the first means of setting enquiry in the right direction.

Two of my servants were called to prove that Gaythorne entered my house that fatal night at about eight o'clock; that he was received by my wife in the library, and remained with her there, as far as they knew, until Thurlow and I arrived. Also, that my wife gave orders to fasten the front door that night earlier than usual, and told the servants not to disturb her at all.

For what purpose he came, and the reason of these precautions, there was nothing to show.

Thurlow and I were called to give our evidence as to entering the library and finding it empty. This the reader already knows, and the questions I had to answer were few and unimportant.

Thurlow's examination was more to the purpose, and his evidence formed the connecting link between Mr. Morsland's death and Gerald Gaythorne's murder. The substance of his evidence was as follows.

Some years before, he had been sent to Leak to endeavour to find a clue to the murder of Mr. Morsland. This gentleman, who had inhabited the Manor House for about two years, was a regular recluse. Few people in the village ever saw him, and it appeared that he seldom, if ever, went outside his own grounds. The large house was only partially furnished in his time, and the only inmates besides himself were two—a woman who cooked and did the cleaning, and a man who acted as Mr. Morsland's secretary and valet. The latter was as great a stranger to the neighbours as his master, which was not altogether to be wondered at; but, by subsequent enquiries, Thurlow found

that he had only been engaged just before Mr. Morsland came to Leak. This did not agree with the popular belief that the valet was the master's tried and trusted servant, and perhaps as eccentric as the old gentleman himself. The old man was found dead in the library on the morning of the fifteenth of November, 18—, by the woman and a fisherman from the village. He had been last seen alive at six o'clock on the previous evening, the valet having been dismissed by him that day, but for what reason never transpired. It was proved beyond a doubt that the valet went up to town by the express that afternoon, which fact established his innocence in all minds, yet, curiously enough, he had never since been seen or heard of, although numerous advertisements were circulated, and every enquiry made for him. The general conclusion was that Mr. Morsland had committed suicide. Many circumstances pointed to the reasonableness of this conclusion. The library-door was locked on the inside, and the windows were shuttered and barred. Only one point remained to cast a doubt upon the matter. Mr. Morsland was found upon the floor with a rope round his neck, as if he had hanged himself, and had fallen after he was dead; but Thurlow, who conducted all the investigations on this occasion, discovered one fact. The only place to which a rope could be fastened was the book-case, near which he was lying, and off the top of which a large piece was broken; this piece was securely tied to the other end of the rope; yet the rope was long enough to allow the broken piece to be fixed in its place, whilst the body stood erect on the floor with the rope round its neck. This point had failed to impress the mind of the coroner in the last inquest, and a verdict of suicide was returned.

Now, the secret passage to the library and its connection with the haunts of a secret society threw doubt on that verdict; and the conversation overheard by us on the night of the meeting negatived it altogether.

"Then, Mr. Thurlow," said the coroner, "you believe now, as you did then, that Mr. Morsland was murdered by some member of this secret society?"

"Not quite. I believe now that he was murdered by one of them; but at the time of his death I had no idea of the existence of this secret society."

"On whom did your suspicions fall, then?"

"On the valet at first?"

"Only at first?"

"Yes."

"Will you explain how your further enquiries led you to alter your opinion?"

"Mr. Gaythorne was the first to open my eyes in another direction. He led me to believe that smuggling was carried on to a great extent in the village, and that there were several very ruffianly fellows, who passed themselves off as fishermen, about the place. I waited and watched, but they were too wary. I found out nothing then, but I watched one man suspiciously—the poor fellow who was killed with Captain Vincent in the well. However, I never got beyond suspecting him at that time."

"You do more now?"

"Yes. I believe he was an accomplice in that crime, if not the actual murderer of Mr. Morsland."

"And his motive?"

"Obedience to the commands of the secret society."

"Now, Mr. Thurlow, what caused you to come to Leak again?" asked the coroner.

"Mr. Gaythorne wrote to me."

The letter which the reader already knows of was produced.

"Had you any idea of the existence of a secret society then?"

To my utter astonishment, Thurlow answered in the affirmative.

"A little more than two years ago a gentleman was murdered at Roshley Hall, Lincolnshire. That case also came under my inspection, and it was quite clear that the valet was the murderer in this case. Perhaps some of you remember it. The valet was never found, and so cleverly was the whole thing planned that I very much doubt if the crime could have been brought home to him had he been arrested. It was done more cleverly than Mr. Morsland's murder, but then there was no secret passage to baffle discovery. This case, of course, made me think more seriously of the Leak murder. Both crimes were apparently committed with no definite purpose; nothing was missing; nobody was benefitted in either case. Naturally, I connected them; and there was another point to strengthen my reason for doing so. Both men had been killed in precisely the same way."

"Hanged!" exclaimed the coroner.

"No, sir. Mr. Morsland was not hanged; he was strangled."

"How?"

"In precisely the same way as Mr. Gaythorne was—by this."

And from his pocket the detective drew the coarse handkerchief he had picked up in the library on the night of Edith's disappearance.

"Have you never heard of the Thug's way of taking life, gentlemen—short, sharp, noiseless, and effective? This handkerchief I found in the library on the night of Mrs. Wade's disappearance—that is, on the night of Mr. Gaythorne's murder."

The handkerchief was passed round and created no small interest.

"Well?" said the coroner, after a pause.

"The fact of finding both men murdered in the same way made me think that the same hands had been employed in the execution of both crimes," continued Thurlow, "or if not the same hands, at least those who had learnt their trade in the same school. Since the murder at Roshley Hall I have been careful to keep up an acquaintance with this village, feeling certain that some day success

would crown my efforts. When I received that letter from Mr. Gaythorne, I felt that the time I had hoped for had come. I came down to Leak, and travelled here with Mr. Wade."

"By chance?"

"No; not by chance. I knew he was coming to London, by the letter, and I went to Waterloo Station in company with a man who has several times been to Leak in my employ. When Mr. Wade arrived from Axminster he was pointed out to me by this man, and from that moment to the time I got into the carriage with him in the afternoon I followed him."

"Had you reason for suspecting Mr. Wade, then?"

"I thought I had. I fancied that he might be the two missing valets. I found myself wrong that afternoon."

Thurlow's further evidence was only what the reader already knows, so it need not be repeated here.

The verdict was a subject of much discussion, for although the facts in the case were many, the links between them were very incomplete. Of course Edith's evidence would throw great light upon the case, but she would be unable to give any for a long time. The verdict was returned in this form:

"We find that Mr. Gerald Gaythorne was murdered at the instigation of the man called Captain Vincent, and that Redfern, the man under arrest, was probably the actual perpetrator of the crime. We further believe that the death of Mr. Morsland, on the night of the fourteenth or morning of the fifteenth November, 18—, was caused by a member or members of that society to which these men belong."

So it ended, and no one could say that it was satisfactory. All had now been done to discover those connected with the secret society, and everything had failed to accomplish that object.

One last hope remained—Redfern's trial, and the trial of those who had been arrested in the village for smuggling.

It would be too tedious to give all the questions and answers which brought out the various facts in these trials. I think it will be more satisfactory if in my own words I give a *résumé* of the whole. This I must say, that a great many of the disclosures made by Redfern were quite unknown before to the other men.

The running of contraband goods had long been part of the trade of the inhabitants of Leak, and most of the men in the place had had a hand in it at one time or another; and for many years the cave had been the storing-place for these goods on account of the difficulty of its approach except at certain states of the tide. However, things had changed very much in later years. About ten years ago Captain Vincent came to live at the cottage, and from the very first day of his appearance had gradually wormed himself into their secrets until he became one of their leading members, gaining the admiration of the bolder and the fear of the weaker smugglers. From his advent, however, the trade declined, and a new element sprang up amongst the frequenters of the cave. One or two of the leading smugglers were let into the secret of Vincent's first appearance there, which was to obtain possession of the cave as a central meeting-place for the secret society to which he belonged. Amongst those so trusted were Redfern and Jim. At different periods, sometimes with short, sometimes with long intervals between, the principal members of the society met. Who and what they were was never told to the smuggling members. They simply obeyed their masters, and were paid for their services. The leaders were of all nationalities, and during their meetings spoke in a language peculiar to the league. Their avowed object was to raise the power of the people. By its laws no Kings—or as they would term them, tyrants—were to be allowed to exist, and, to work slowly towards this end, persons whose position and power made them obstacles to this desired consummation were voted to death by the

head council of the society. Each individual so doomed was given over to the mercy of one man, chosen by the chief of that branch in whose district the offending person lived, and it was this man's bounden duty to encompass his victim's death by whatever means he found most expedient.

Every means were taken to ensure the safety of the meeting-place. The entrance from Vincent's cottage was constructed, and the entrance to the Manor House, and also the way by which, in case of emergency, escape could be effected by the well.

Mr. Morsland was a member of this society, although not an important one. By command he came to live at the Manor House, which had previously been empty for some time ; but he came there quite unconscious that he was close to the meeting-place of the supreme council of his society. A feasible reason was given him for this command, the real reason being that it was thought advisable to watch him. Some member had, for some reason, reported him to the head of his district, and this was sufficient cause for his being kept under surveillance. His valet was a member of the society, also placed there to watch him. The result is known. The valet proved him guilty. He was voted to death, and the man appointed to kill him was Jim. The deed was done by means of the secret entrance and the handkerchief ; but it was an afterthought to make it appear as if he had committed suicide. The reason for this was to keep the house unoccupied by connecting it with a grim story.

The consequence was that it stood empty until I took it, and, then, so great did they consider the danger of having an unauthorised person there, that Vincent attempted to outbid me for the place. He failed, and I took up my residence, and the subsequent sounds, and the strange appearance in the library, were simply intended to frighten me away.

This was all Redfern knew about the society, except that he gave it as his opinion that the murder at Roshley Hall was due to some member in another district. As regards the disappearance of my wife, he said the society had nothing to do with it. Vincent had fallen in love with her from the first moment he saw her, and had gradually made up his mind to elope with her at the risk of being voted to death, and, to accomplish this, two men were taken into his confidence—Redfern and Clarke. The latter was the man who had been so anxious to kill Jim in the inn that night.

Vincent's plans were complete. He was to get me away to London; to kidnap my wife in my absence; and, having arranged to do this on the night before a meeting of the council, he was to get me voted to death so as to show her my body. Everything went against him. He got me to London, but in his endeavour to keep Gaythorne away from the Manor House that night he failed. Gaythorne must necessarily be silenced, and in consequence of his presence there he was murdered, strangled with the handkerchief by Vincent himself. My wife was secured, but only just in time. Thurlow and I must have entered the room before the hearthstone had quite resumed its position. His voting me to death was also a failure, and the idea of passing Gaythorne's body off as mine was resolved upon.

One thing more came out.

My sudden appearance at The Wheatsheaf on the night of Vincent's brutality was the means of saving Jim's life. To openly talk of betraying the secret was punishable by death, and Jim was especially dangerous, knowing what he did.

This was all that could be found out. Redfern was sentenced to a long term of penal servitude, and the others to various terms, but no clue could be found to the heads of this society.

How they were warned to keep away from the place I cannot

say ; but although all press notices of the discovery were suppressed, and a force kept constantly waiting for them, they never came.

In time Vincent's cottage became a coastguard station, and the caves became a place which travellers from far and wide came to see. I had the well partly filled up, and a platform placed across it on a level with the entrance to the cave; and a ladder fixed to the wall formed a means of getting down to inspect the subterranean caverns. The house was a great object of interest, too ; but those who came to see the secret entrance were destined to be disappointed, for I had it done away with as soon as possible.

One thing more before I close this part of my story.

Two years afterwards, a man was arrested in St. Petersburg as being a dangerous Nihilist, and was sent to Siberia to drag out the remainder of his days in slavery. From information I received, I have every reason to believe that he was the old man who sat at the head of the table on the night of the secret meeting.

CHAPTER XXV.

As far as the public interest in this story goes, I have finished ; and it only remains for me to add a few words about Edith and myself.

It was six weeks or more before my wife was out of danger, and during the whole of that time I was not allowed to see her. I shall never forget the afternoon when I was first permitted to go to her.

Poor little girl ! She was so weak and thin then that I should hardly have known her. She welcomed me with the faintest of smiles—it was the most enthusiastic sign of gladness she was capable of in those days—and I think my visit did her good.

Tediously, but surely, she won her way back to health, and just ten weeks after that fatal night she came downstairs again.

No one can know how my love went out to her in those first days of her convalescence. It was so sweet to have her near me again, to look at, to talk to, and without all the vile and suspicious fancies of which I had been guilty.

It was a long time before I would let her speak of that night.

Let me tell her story in my own words.

She had always liked Gerard Gaythorne from the first, and, with a woman's perception, she had equally disliked Captain Vincent from the first day he set foot in her new home. Why she did so at first she could not explain, except by saying that her likes and dislikes always dated from the first time she saw a person. But later on there was a definite reason. She began to fancy that he made love to her, and yet the conviction came upon her so uncertainly, and with so little actual proof, that she feared I should laugh at her if she said anything to me about it. She felt that he admired her—more, loved her—and yet he never betrayed himself by actual word or deed. Hence her dislike to the man. As her dislike became greater she noticed with uneasiness the growing friendship between Vincent and myself, and about this time also, Gaythorne, in the most kindly and friendly way possible, began to warn her against the Captain. After the first alarm in the house, he declared to her that he believed Vincent was at the bottom of all the mystery, and she, ready to believe anything evil of him, came to the conclusion that Gaythorne was right. Seeing that I was prejudiced in Vincent's favour, they arranged to watch him without consulting me. To make everything harder for her, she began to see that I was suspicious of her, and then her dislike turned to a bitter hatred of Vincent.

In this state of mind she forbade him the house, and determined

to make one desperate effort to unravel the mystery. Gaythorne always felt certain that it lay in the library, and he wrote Edith a letter making an appointment, choosing, of course, the evening I was away.

In the first instance, she tore that letter in half and threw it in the waste-paper basket, but afterwards went to take it out again, in case Vincent should see it by any chance. Half the letter she had in her possession, the other half she could not find, but she never guessed the terrible use the missing portion had been put to.

This is the facsimile of the other half :

	fear, in that case, all w
	latter I feel perfectly certai
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band I hear is going to	me, and that he would h
morning next, I think	say to bring the crime home to
t for our secret	I must thank you
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out our plans.	that former brightness a
to discover and learn	you have lately by
ld not for the world have	Yours fai
in Vincent know, for I	GERALD

"DEAR MRS. WADE,

"Leak.

"As your husband, I hear, is going to London on Tuesday morning next, I think we might fix that night for our secret meeting. At eight o'clock we will commence in the library, and when we are sure everything is quiet, we can carry out our plans. It may be dangerous to discover and learn this secret ; but I would not for the world have your husband or Captain Vincent know, for I fear, in that case, all would be lost. The latter, I feel perfectly

certain, is guilty, and I am just as sure that your husband suspects me, and that he would hear nothing I should say to bring the crime home to him (Captain Vincent). I must thank you for the trust and faith you have placed in me ; and success, I think, will come to us, and I may give you back that former brightness and happiness which you have lately by no means enjoyed.

“Yours faithfully,

“GERALD GAYTHORNE.”

I went to town, and the meeting took place. They had not been in the library many minutes, and were inspecting one of the book-cases—the one near which we found the lamp burning—when three men entered by the secret way, so silently that they were in the room before Edith and Gaythorne were aware of the fact. One was Vincent, one was Redfern, and the other was a stranger to her.

Gaythorne was seized by Vincent, and a handkerchief was put round his neck—she thought to silence him ; but a moment afterwards he fell forwards, with a ghastly expression on his face. Just then she heard a commotion in the hall, and cried for help, but was silenced by Redfern, and carried into the secret passage. She was taken to the room where I discovered her, and on three occasions was obliged to listen to Vincent's protestations of love.

On the night of her rescue he came to her, and after again impressing upon her that I was dead, and that he was going to take her away with him, he placed a chloroformed handkerchief over her face, and she remembered no more. She seemed to have a faint recollection of a struggle, but it was very faint indeed.

This was all.

Two things I shall never know. First, who the man was Thurlow chased down the avenue that night. Redfern said only two were taken into Vincent's confidence ; so, either he lied, or else some other member of the society was watching the house. Perhaps

Vincent had already given his brethren cause for suspicion. Secondly, what was Vincent's real idea in running away with my wife? Edith does not think he did it for his love of her, but for some deeper reason; but I am inclined to the belief that he did love her in an unholy and desperate kind of way.

So ends my story. No one knows how I blame myself for ever having been suspicious of my wife. It might have been the means of sowing bitterness in our lives, and I ought to have been more manly, more straightforward, more trustful. But it is a period in my life I do not like contemplating. Let me forget it as surely as Edith has forgiven it.

Dear little wife! After a time the roses came back to her cheeks and the laughter to her eyes. Again she reigned supreme, the fairest thing about the house, the sweetest flower that lent beauty to the garden.

I am writing these last lines in the library of the Manor House, which is our home for about six months in the year, and a little girl, who calls me father, is playing with the paper-basket at my feet.

Edith has just come into the room with a vase of fresh-cut flowers to decorate my table, and, looking over my shoulder, reads the words I have written in her praise.

"What nonsense, Edward!" she says, kissing me. "Cut that little piece about me out directly. Believe me, I am a very commonplace young woman."

Well, I don't think so; and I refuse to alter what I have written.



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